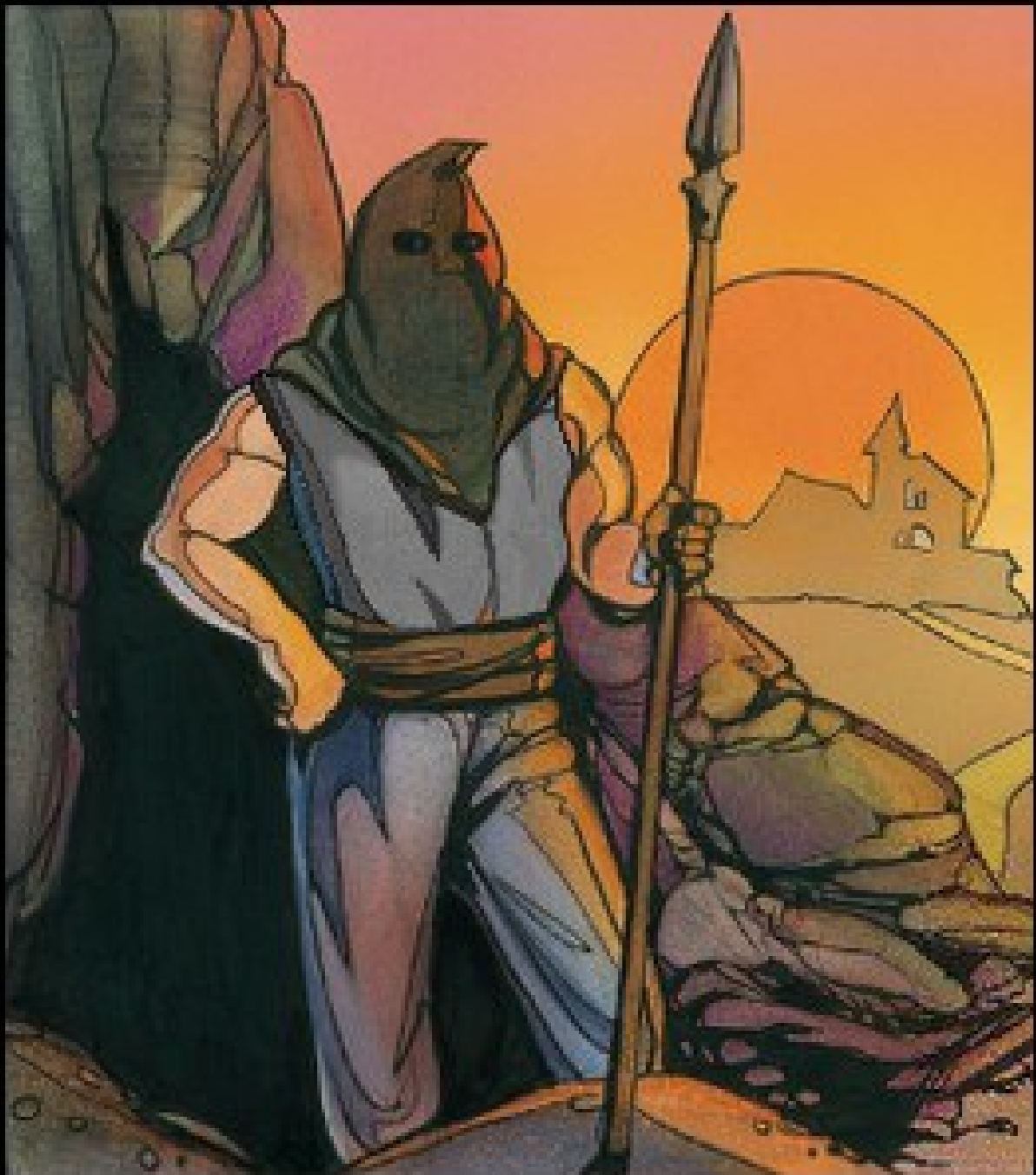


# THE INVESTIGATORS in

## THE SECRET OF THE CAVE OF TORTURE





in

**THE SECRET  
OF THE  
CAVE OF TORTURE**

The Three Investigators goes on a week-long stay at Adventure Hotel located in the remote mountains. They look forward to participating in a series of adventure activities at the Ghost Castle and its newest attraction, the Cave of Torture. When strange incidents start to happen, the harmless stay turns into a dangerous adventure for Jupiter, Pete and Bob. It is clear to them that somebody is trying to sabotage the hotel's operations. They then learn that there is a dark secret surrounding the cave. Can they unravel the secret and catch the culprit?

The Three Investigators  
in  
The Secret of the Cave of Torture

*Original German text by  
Ben Nevis*

*Based on characters created by  
Robert Arthur*

*Translated, adapted, and edited from:*

*Die drei ???: Die Höhle des Grauens*

*(The Three ???: The Cave of Horror)*

*by*

*Ben Nevis*

*(2003)*

*Cover art by*

*Silvia Christoph*

*(2020-12-04)*

## **Contents**

- 1. The Ghost Castle**
- 2. Surprise on the Train**
- 3. The Poacher and the Dark Bird**
- 4. Soupe Guillotine**
- 5. Bob Investigates**
- 6. Intruder in the Hotel**
- 7. A Big White Lie**
- 8. Ghost Stories**
- 9. The Three Tests**
- 10. Stranded at the Lakeside**
- 11. The Noose is Tightening**
- 12. The Archives of the Waterstones**
- 13. The Poacher's Cabin**
- 14. The Cave of Torture**
- 15. Who is the Hooded Executioner?**
- 16. A Leap Over the Abyss**
- 17. The Final Test**
- 18. "Well Done, Jupiter Jones!"**

## 1. The Ghost Castle

“A whole week at the Ghost Castle!” Jupiter leaned against the desk in their headquarters and leafed through a hotel brochure that had come with the other travel documents. “How is Pete gonna get through this? You could hear his teeth chatter when a mouse runs around at night.”

The First Investigator pointed to the photo of a dining room. A huge silvery spider web stretched out from under the ceiling, with a spider lurking around the edge. “Wow! Eating pizza under the monster spider!”

“Now stop it, Jupe!” Bob got up and looked through the blinds. “We’re pretty mean with our jokes about Pete and besides, he’s here!”

A brightly polished red MG had just entered the grounds of The Jones Salvage Yard. Pete braked sharply and his car stopped in front of the trailer, which served as the headquarters for The Three Investigators.

A few seconds later, The Second Investigator entered the trailer and immediately he noticed the smirk that was still visible in the faces of his friends. He could guess who they were talking about. “Were you talking about me?”

“What makes you think so?” Jupe asked.

“That treacherous grin on your lips...”

“We were just wondering if you were really up for a ride to the scary hotel,” Jupe said.

Pete twisted his mouth in indignation. “I thought so, Jupe! You’ve played the old record again—Pete the coward! No, I’m not afraid of the Ghost Castle. You know as well as I do that everything is just a big game and it is meant to entertain guests. The whole thing is an adventure! What could I possibly be afraid of?”

Bob approached him from behind and grabbed his back with his fingers. “Maybe they are real ghosts after all,” he whispered with the darkest voice he could make out.

“Don’t do that!” Pete suddenly turned around. Bob was really getting on his nerves.

Pete had trouble convincing his parents to let him go on the week-long trip, as they would have preferred to see him at a sports training camp. But in the end, he succeeded with the argument that The Three Investigators had honestly earned the trip to the Ghost Castle in a tough detective competition organized by a well-known movie director. He could not possibly let Jupiter and Bob down. After all, they had won first prize in the Los Angeles area.

“I can’t wait to see the winners from San Francisco,” he said to change the subject. “They are called ‘Callidae’.” And with a smile on his lips, he added: “That means something like ‘clever’. Maybe they are even smarter than you, Jupe!”

Jupiter frowned. “You wish! More than your jibes, however, I was surprised by your knowledge of Latin, even though it doesn’t seem quite mature to me.”

“Callidae?” Pete laughed. “I was curious and looked it up. Admit it, you’re afraid of them! You don’t like competition.”

“I don’t care who goes there but us,” Jupe claimed stubbornly. “After all, the detective competition is already over. More so, after over a hundred cases, we finally deserve a vacation! I would like to enjoy the horror in the Ghost Castle and relax and be pampered in a classic way by one or more entertaining puzzles. I hope for as much mystery as possible! Just

imagine, just the three of us, without relatives, without girlfriends, without cars, it's almost a bit like—"

"You sound like our maths teacher," Pete interjected. "He always wants to get away from everything—especially his students."

"Oh nonsense!" Jupiter pulled out a duffel bag from under his desk and paused. With a glance at the clock he added: "Packing is quick, by the way. Aunt Mathilda has already prepared my clothes."

"You and your Aunt Mathilda's Carefree Package!" Bob snorted away.

"What do you have against Aunt Mathilda's help?" Jupiter asked in surprise. "She knows her way around my closet best!"

"She would also be missing something else," commented Pete smugly. "I hope she hasn't forgotten those candy bars... or else her precious nephew will starve to death!"

"I'll see to that myself!" Jupiter took a large package from the shelf and stuffed it in a side pocket. He also put some bags of jelly babies in another side pocket. "I'm also thinking about what detective equipment we should take with us—flashlights, lock picks, fingerprint powder, mobile phone..."

"I don't think you'll have to do that," Bob interjected. "You just said it yourself—we'll have a peaceful seven days. Everything is taken care of! There's no point in chasing ghosts who perform for the guests." He hesitated. "Pete? You suddenly look so sceptical?"

"Wherever we turn up, something always gets out of hand," Pete explained gloomily. "We have already experienced this often enough. Can you name just one holiday that had gone normally? Even when we were lost in the desert, we end up in an adventure. I don't even dare to recall that. Anyway, we seem to have a magical attraction to anything mysterious." He laughed. "We should urgently warn every nice person—if you invite The Three Investigators, you are just asking for trouble!"

Jupiter smiled. "Statistically, there's no denying it, although you confuse cause and effect, Pete. I would put it like this—something happens that no one can explain, perhaps something evil or mysterious is being planned. And fortunately, The Three Investigators appear on the scene and put things right just in time. The mysterious attracts us and not vice versa. Imagine how many cases are never identified as cases just because we're not around. There must be thousands... What's the matter, Bob? You suddenly seem so thoughtful?"

"I just thought of something," Bob said and started looking around in his jacket. "Last week there was a short article in the *Los Angeles Times*. There was almost an accident at the Adventure Hotel with serious consequences because the hotel operators came across a mysterious cave! It was supposed to be opened to tourists under the name 'Cave of Torture', but when the last renovation work was about to be completed, water suddenly entered the cave... Fortunately, everyone was able to escape."

"The Cave of Torture," Pete repeated soundlessly. "There it is. Water came in. My holiday spirit is gone again!" He turned to Juve. "And you'll have to do without the mobile phone! Have you forgotten the travel rules again?"

Pete grabbed a piece of paper that was on his desk among a thousand other things, and unfolded it. "Listen to what this Mrs Jennings, who runs the hotel, wrote:"

*Dear Guests!*

*We are delighted that you have chosen Adventure Hotel. You are rightly looking forward to a week of adventure and horror. You have paid a lot of money and should keep a lasting impression of the days. The effect will be more intense for you if you follow some guidelines.*



*The Ghost Castle lies lonely and remote in Arizona. We want you to devote yourself to your holiday for one week completely undisturbed. Believe us, without a connection to your familiar world, you will be much more receptive to our ideas! The best thing to do is to sign off completely from your relatives, friends and colleagues for one week. Explain to them that you can only be reached through the travel agency in urgent cases.*

*So please keep your mobile phone switched off, or better still, leave it at home. Anyway, there is no mobile phone reception in this region. For emergencies, there is of course a telephone and also a radio system available in the hotel.*

*Your rooms do not have radios or television sets. There is only one computer in the hotel—the one that controls our installation. So please refrain from using the Internet and e-mail. Allow yourself the freedom and the luxury of being unreachable!*

Pete looked up. “What did I tell you?”

“So expensive, yet there is not even a TV in the room?” Bob remarked. “Luckily, we won the trip.”

Pete took the brochure and flipped through it. “I’m curious to see who else is going there with us. It says here that they can take up to 25 guests.”

“If you’re speculating on nice girls, you’re bound to be disappointed, Pete! I’m more likely to bet on rich pensioners,” Jupe grinned.

“Bored elderly people and two teams of detectives in between,” Bob added. “But knowing us, we’re gonna stir this place up!”

Pete continued to read from the brochure. ““The Ghost Castle can only be reached by train,”” he summarized. ““You will be picked up at Haunted Corner by the hotel’s minibuses.’ Where does it say something about that dreadful cave?”

“It’s not mentioned in the brochure,” Bob said. “I think it is because it is a new attraction.” After searching through a pile of documents on the table, he fished out a sheet of paper. “Here it is, fellas. This is what it says:”

*We are especially pleased to introduce you to the Cave of Torture for the very first time. It is truly a sensation—a cave that we came across during the construction work for Adventure Hotel and which we had to clear off the dirt and mud over months of work.*

*Let yourself be surprised by the mysticism of the cave, the ancient skeleton, and the Hooded Executioner who guards the cave.*

With a dignified movement, Bob folded the paper and put it in his jacket pocket.

Pete’s thirst for a holiday was now completely gone. “I think you two can go without me,” he moaned. “That place sounds like a nightmare!”

## 2. Surprise on the Train

The train was not exactly empty, and The Three Investigators had to fight their way through the carriages before they reached the last carriage in which their seats were located. However, two of their seats were occupied but the third on the other side of the aisle was free. The two girls occupying in the detectives' seats looked at each other questioningly and ignored the three boys.

Jupiter pulled out their tickets and waved the slips of paper in the air. "These seats are booked for us, ladies."

The girl sitting at the window, hardly older than Jupiter, threw her hair to the side and looked at The Three Investigators sternly through her glasses. "You're too late, boys. We boarded much earlier. Anyone this late will lose their claim to the seat. Two of you can seat in front of us."

"Fine with us, but you have your bags on those two seats!" Jupe said, pointing to the two facing seats. "Can you please move them then?"

Bob and Pete exchanged a look. They had nothing against charming travel companions, but Jupiter always had to be so bossy. The other girl pushed her friend into the side. "Come, Julia! Let these rude boys sit here. I'm sure we can find some place nicer." She was getting ready to get up.

Without hesitation, Pete pointed to the girls' backpacks. "Perhaps I can help you put your bags onto the luggage compartment above," he said and put on a winning smile. "That will leave these two seats free."

"Gladly... if your friend agrees..." the first girl said.

Jupiter was not asked any further. One minute later, Bob and Jennifer—as she had introduced herself—were sitting across from each other. Pete had sat in front of Julia. Jupiter sat across the aisle and was staring through the opposite window. The boring suburbs of L.A. seemed to interest him greatly.

In view of the unexpected female company, Pete really got going. It didn't take a minute before he had already revealed their holiday destination and proudly mentioned that they had won the trip as a prize. How they had achieved this victory after a hard fight was the subject of another elaborate explanation. Bob became embarrassed as Pete tried to recruit new fans. Now, at the climax of his presentation, Pete pulled out the business card of The Three Investigators and handed it over to Julia.

"This is us—The Three Investigators." He took a dramatic pause.

Julia took the card and read it to Jennifer:



“Nice,” was her whole comment without changing her facial expression.

At first, Pete was speechless. Where was the admiration?

“And you two?” Bob asked the two girls. “Where are you going?”

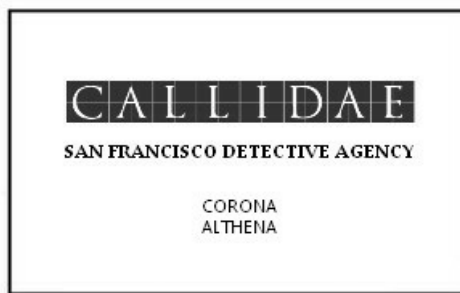
“Haunted Corner,” Jennifer replied.

“Haunted Corner?” Bob echoed in surprise. “But that is that station in the middle of nowhere where we’re getting off!”

“Right. We are going to the same place.” Julia nodded over to her friend. “Let me introduce ourselves—Callidae, San Francisco Detective Agency.”

“Oh my gosh!” Jupiter moaned softly across the aisle.

Then Julia handed over their card. It said:



On the card, the boys saw that Callidae worked with aliases—Julia called herself ‘Corona’ and Jennifer, ‘Althena’.

Jupiter followed the conversation inconspicuously. Now and then he looked at Corona, who noticeably held back. He sensed that she had a sharp mind and did not want to lay all her cards on the table right away. In this respect, she seemed to be similar to him.

But it was no longer about a detective competition. Their trip was for recreation... unless there was a dark story behind what Bob had dug out about the cave from the papers.

Jupiter looked out the window again. In the meantime, the landscape had changed. It had become more mountainous and wooded at the same time. There was no question that the area had become lonelier. After he had watched the passing nature for a while, tiredness overcame him and he nodded off.

When Jupe woke up again, the surroundings outside had become even more deserted. He stretched and let his gaze wander back into the interior of the train. Sitting diagonally opposite him on the window side was a man who had been reading a book the whole time. He was about forty years old. The angular glasses gave his sharply cut face something austere, which contrasted with his emphatically casual but not unfashionable clothing.

Jupiter knew the book. It was a thrilling detective novel. He could make out the big printed chapter title and he noticed that the man was still on the same page as when before Jupiter had fallen asleep. Was the reading just a cover? Again and again, the man glanced

over to Pete and Bob, who continued to have a splendid conversation with the girls. Apparently he was trying to eavesdrop on their conversation despite the train's noise.

The woman facing Jupiter, who was sitting next to the man, was also leafing through a book. She was a little younger than the man, and Jupiter estimated her to be in her early thirties. She had tied her dark curly hair at the back. She was passing the time with a successful fantasy best-seller. After all, she seemed to find reading so stimulating that she was not distracted by her surroundings. But when one of the train attendants came along, she looked up and asked: "When do we reach Haunted Corner?"

"We'll be there in just over an hour, ma'am. We'll let you know."

"Thank you."

Suddenly, the man turned to lady and asked: "You're going to the Adventure Hotel?"

"Yeah," the woman replied.

"Then we are going to the same place! What a surprise! Jack is my name—Jack Donnelly."

"Susan Dice. But it's not much of a coincidence, Mr Donnelly. I assume that many of the passengers in this carriage get off at Haunted Corner. The platform is so short that only one carriage can stop there. This was taken into consideration for seat reservations."

"Oh! That's interesting! I didn't know that Haunted Corner had such a small station... So you also want to... uh... go for something a little creepy?"

"Yes, I need a week off from my daily routine. How about you?"

"I am a screenwriter for one of the Hollywood movie studios. Working on movies is really a treadmill, and I'm afraid I'm a little burned out. Maybe I'll get some new ideas from the Ghost Castle... at least I hope so."

"You are a screenwriter... how exciting! That sounds incredibly exciting. I read in the travel brochure that a lot of exciting things are waiting for us. Maybe this will really inspire you to new ideas. White-water rafting through the Gorge of Death is on the programme and also a visit to the Cave of Torture!"

Jupe followed the conversation for a while, but then lost interest as it became more and more about exchanging pleasantries and compliments. He got up to stretch his legs and decided to take a stroll through the carriage. If what this Susan Dice had said was true, then the other guests of the hotel were also among the passengers in this train carriage.

And indeed... in several places, people were talking about the Ghost Castle. There were two older ladies, who must both be over seventy—one a little chubbier than the other. Sitting opposite them was a man with a bald head and a light green sweater, who was just sharing his knowledge of the Ghost Castle.

"It was only six months ago that the hotel opened. We're going to experience the very latest spook, ladies. I hope you have strong nerves!"

"You'll need them too, sir! Have you heard of the Cave of Torture... where there was almost an accident?" Elizabeth, the more corpulent of the two ladies, lowered her voice as if revealing a great secret. "You only have to see the connection... I tell you, there's a real ghost behind it! An evil curse lies in the cave! Anyone who enters it will die."

"You know, sooner or later we're all going to die," said the man in the green sweater. "I don't suppose you believe in such nonsense?" He stretched out and looked up at Jupiter, who had stopped curiously. "Can I help you, young man?"

"Oh, no, everything's fine." Jupiter would have liked to know more about the cave, but the opportunity to listen to the conversation for longer was gone. So he set himself in motion again.

While he was still thinking about the old lady's remark, he discovered a face among the other passengers that looked familiar to him. Sure, it was John Fairbanks—a Hollywood actor who appeared in action movies, accompanied by a young colleague whom Jupiter also knew from the movies. Her name was Hayley Montgomery or something like that. Were the two also on their way to Haunted Corner?

Once again Jupiter's gaze was distracted. A woman had suddenly got up in the middle of the carriage. With her witch-like red-green cape and her grey headscarf, she had already caught Jupiter's eye. At first sight, she seemed to be very old, but when Jupe looked closely into her face, the impression corrected to an age of perhaps mid-forties.

She immediately attracted attention when she took a step into the aisle and stopped. Her lips moved as if she wanted to say something, but no sound came out. Then she began to speak very softly and the conversations of those sitting around her slowly fell silent. They were unconnected fragments of words: "A journey... I see a journey into the unknown... something dangerous is lurking." Her voice was thin and only slowly gained strength, speaking almost in a single pitch.

In the meantime, the last conversation had also fallen silent. Everyone present now stared at the woman. "Warn... warn, I must warn you... the Cave of Torture... is guarded by the Hooded Executioner... the skeleton is a sign, there will be a victim in the end, but who... nobody knows... nobody knows whom the executioner will come for at night... when you see him, it will be too late." She was silent and sank back into her seat.

Jupiter's gaze wandered over the passengers. John Fairbanks expertly held the pale Hayley Montgomery in his arms. The two old ladies had also jumped up and supported themselves on the seats. Their mouths moved as if to recall what they had just heard. Jupe saw Corona, the detective from San Francisco, grinning at him.

Something was fishy. What was the game being played here? Suddenly, The First Investigator realized the connections.

Slowly Jupiter continued walking. He stopped in front of the witch's seat. He bent down to her. When she did not react, Jupiter pulled off her headscarf with a quick grip. Together with the headscarf, The First Investigator suddenly held a wig in his hand to reveal a woman with short red-blond hair.

"Good afternoon, Mrs Jennings!" Jupiter said politely.

A murmur went through the carriage and the people present looked at and around Jupiter, just to make sure they didn't miss anything.

The woman blinked her eyes, sat up straight as if nothing had happened and laughed briefly. "I congratulate you, young sir. I am indeed Maggie Jennings!"

The woman stood up. Suddenly she looked like the nice neighbour who was inviting people in for coffee. "A hearty 'hello' to you, dear guests. I'd like to say a few words about what you just witnessed."

"Perhaps I should say something first," Jupiter cut her off. "I suppose you wanted to put us in the mood for the days ahead. You are the woman who runs the Adventure Hotel!"

Mrs Jennings nodded. Jupiter enjoyed the hit and continued: "The next few days are all about talking to ghosts and scary stories, about fear and terror. But the holiday does not only start in the mountains. You surprised us and arranged the first experience here in the train."

Jupiter waited a moment until the astonished heckling had subsided. "To this end, you played us the trance-like warning from a wise old woman and at the same time you staged your main attraction—the Cave of Torture. The performance was so convincing and impressive. But two things made me suspicious. First, I realized that all of us in this carriage are going to Haunted Corner. Second, your disguise was good, but not so perfect."

Mrs Jennings let Jupiter's words sink in a little, then she said: "Ladies and gentlemen, everything is as the young man here told you." She turned to Jupiter. "Aren't you one of the boys from Rocky Beach?"

"Jupiter Jones," Jupiter said and nodded briefly.

Mrs Jennings continued: "Dear guests, welcome to an interesting week at our cosy, creepy Adventure Hotel! You've just realized how quickly you can get caught up in a little trick. But let me assure you once again—it's all just a game! You need not be afraid. If one of our ideas gets too much for you, just say our code word 'Happy Ending', and the whole thing will be over in no time. You have come to have a good time! So join in. This holiday can be compared to a crime thriller. You know that everything is invented and that the culprit will be caught in the end. But still you will experience the whole adventurous story with suspense. With this in mind, I wish you seven exciting days! And... are you really sure that one of our ghosts isn't real?" Mrs Jennings smiled profoundly and then bowed at the end of her little performance.

Most of the passengers applauded.

### 3. The Poacher and the Dark Bird

Some guests were still surprised when they got off at Haunted Corner. The bareness of the place was very impressive. Steep grey rock walls on both sides of the gorge swallowed the light of the end of the day. Dark rain clouds moved over the edge of the rock.

A strong wind was blowing and the twenty-five guests huddled together on the small, makeshift platform, which seemed like a foreign body in the lonely landscape. As soon as the last piece of luggage was unloaded, the train chugged away again. Shortly afterwards, only the wind could be heard.

Before anyone could regret coming to this uncomfortable area, Maggie Jennings took command in a firm voice and pointed to two off-road minibuses parked a distance away from the train platform. "Come on, ladies and gentlemen. Our transport to the hotel is waiting over there. Those who do not want to carry their luggage can simply leave it on the platform. My staff will take care of it for you!"

The two drivers of the minibuses, two men, introduced themselves as Ken and Pat. They asked the guests to distribute themselves among the minibuses. Each minibus had a seating capacity of fourteen passengers with ample space for their luggage.

The Three Investigators could hardly wait to arrive at the Ghost Castle. Together with the girls, they got into the first minibus. The two older ladies also squeezed themselves onto the seats, and the man whom they were talking to in the train sat behind them. Apparently they had found a grateful listener and companion in the man in the green sweater.

"My sister and I are so glad you are here, Mr Stanley," remarked Elizabeth, the chubbier of the two ladies. "It was really cool and scary at the train station! It's good to have a strong man around."

"Well, this isn't a coffee cruise," replied Mr Stanley with honour, "but you said you had nerves of steel!"

"You may assume so," confirmed the other Miss Waterstone. She was thinner than her sister and had her grey hair tied back. "There is hardly anything that could surprise us. For half a century, no ghost story has been safe from us."

"Ghosts are our passion," her sister said. "We've spent half our lives tracking them down. We also want to discover a real ghost in the cave. Right, Cynthia?"

"Don't talk so much, Elizabeth." Mr Stanley laughed. Tactfully, or perhaps because he thought the old ladies were a bit too much for him, he changed the subject and turned to Jupiter. "Well, young man, great work exposing that little performance in the train earlier."

Jupiter cleared his throat and replied dryly: "I do hope that even more exciting things will happen in the next few days!"

"You bet!" Mr Stanley said. "I'm sure Mrs Jennings has come up with a lot. Ah, here comes our driver now. That tall man over there with the black hair—that seems to be Ken. He told me that we are going to be shaken vigorously for an hour. Fasten your seat belts, ladies."

The gravel road was in such a state that it really did require an off-road vehicle to get ahead. Cynthia Waterstone nervously clung to her seat. Althena and Corona calmly surveyed the landscape. Pete seemed more interested in the two girls than in the surroundings. Jupe noticed it with a mixture of amusement and displeasure.

Suddenly Ken, the driver, pointed to a narrow valley. "This is the Gorge of Death," he said. "Our destination lies beyond the forest."

They crossed a torrent that gushed out of the valley, then the rocky walls of the gorge swallowed the last light of the day. Ken turned on the headlights and slowed down. The road got worse and worse.

Bob stared straight ahead. He couldn't stand such bumpy rides and his stomach had a queasy feeling. Luckily, he was sitting in the front seat. His eyes were straining to find a firm point to hold on to.

Suddenly, he startled. From the headlights of the minibus, he saw a man at the top of a huge boulder ahead.

"Look at that," cried Bob. "A man with a bow and arrow! Now he's pointing it at us! ... There on the rock!"

The minibus drove slowly and also the others could see the man. He looked almost like a statue. One knee on the ground, the other bent, he held the unusual weapon. Bob noticed the man's wild light hair and also the leather top he was wearing. His face was almost completely hidden behind a rampant beard. But then the rock had disappeared from the beam of light of the vehicle and the spook seemed to be over.

"The poacher!" Ken said. "One minute he was—"

Cynthia Waterstone drowned it out with her deep voice. "A very good idea from Mrs Jennings," she said. "If I didn't know it was another one of her jokes, the sight of that man would have scared the living daylight out of me!"

"Lady, that was not a—" Ken wanted to continue, but he interrupted himself in the middle of the sentence. "You're absolutely right, ladies. Everything is completely harmless! A joke," he laughed. "Just a joke!"

Suddenly Ken was like a different person. "Soon we will reach the Ghost Castle," he said. "On the right, in daylight, you could see Bear's Corner—a steep rock where bears are always spotted. And a little further behind it is Bear Lake, a beautiful destination by day. It feeds the stream we crossed earlier..."

Jupiter, Pete and Bob did not pay attention to Ken's commentary. They were too busy with the apparition on the rock. No doubt Ken was trying to cover up something. The poacher did not really seem to be one of the planned attractions of Adventure Hotel.

After almost an hour, Ken let the minibus roll out on a gravel yard. The other minibus was parked to the right. The two drivers turned off the engine and turned off the lights. It became dark and quiet.

"Are we there?" asked one of the Waterstone sisters. "Mr Stanley, what do we need to prepare for now?"

"I haven't the faintest idea!" the man in the green sweater said.

Suddenly, bright lightning flashed through the darkness. For a fraction of a second, the black wall of the Ghost Castle became visible a short distance away. Then everything was dark again. The Three Investigators rubbed their eyes. Was that the Ghost Castle?

As a shadow on the retina, the lightning continued to have an effect for seconds. As if from nowhere, red spots lit up where the walls had just been seen. It took a while before the three boys realized that those were the windows of the building. The red became more intense until it finally looked as if the guests were being stared at by devil eyes. The light in the windows flickered and finally went out completely.

Then a loud, tinny voice sounded: "Welcome to the Ghost Castle! Have a scary stay!"



Suddenly the whole place was bathed in bright light and The Three Investigators saw that they had parked right in front of a fantastic building. It looked smaller than in the brochure, but no less creepy. The walls were made of black, hewn stone, and from it was a two-storey building, to which several towers and pointed roofs gave it a castle-like, ghostly appearance. Demon-like figures were embedded in small oriels, which looked like ghostly shadows in the bluish light with which they were now illuminated. The rear part of the castle seemed to merge directly into the rock on which it was built.

Although The Three Investigators knew that everything was designed to entertain the guests, a slight shiver ran down their spines when they saw the Ghost Castle.

In the middle of the scene stood a man. He had dark hair and was slightly taller than Mrs Jennings. She stood beside him and put her arm around him. "Teddy Jennings, my husband. It took him years to gather the items from flea markets, old houses and auctions to build Adventure Hotel. He is also responsible for the technology. Together with Pat and Ken, whom you have already met, we run the hotel. But now you can go in and move into your rooms. Teddy will brief you. We'll meet later for dinner at... the Hall of Spiders."

"I'm really hungry after all this excitement," Elizabeth Waterstone said. "Maybe we should have gone to a gourmet hotel in Florida after all, don't you think so, Cynthia?"

"White beaches bore me too much," her sister said. "Besides, I'm sure there are no real ghosts there!"

Jupiter looked at them, but was then distracted by Ken and Pat, who gathered the luggage to transport it by a cart into the hotel.

The manager of the hotel called the guests into the lobby. The first thing Jupiter noticed was the slightly musty smell. As expected, Maggie and Teddy Jennings had decorated the room in the style of an old English castle, perhaps even a little darker.

In subdued light, the guests gathered to check in. The lobby featured huge paintings depicting people who would have looked good in any scary movie.

A short distance from the counter, in the middle of a wooden bar, was a bird with a dark brown body, black-hooded head and a bright yellow bill. His foot had a small ring to which a thin rope was attached, the other end of which was tied to the pole. The bird looked a little tattered. He hopped from one leg to the other and squawked cheerfully at each of the guests: "I'm afraid! I am afraid! I'm scared!"

"Very effective," Jupiter commented and winked at Pete. "That reminds me of someone."

"He really speaks my mind." Pete leaned closer to the bird and mimicked him: "Me too! I'm afraid! I am afraid! I'm scared!"

"Go or I'll shoot you," the dark bird yapped back.

Mrs Jennings, who witnessed the little scene, laughed. "That's Blackeye," she introduced the bird. "He showed up when we started construction, and has been welcoming our guests ever since. He is a mynah—a bird that is particularly adept at mimicking human speech."

"Usually even better than a parrot," remarked Juve, who knew this type of bird very well.

Not everyone liked the tousled bird as much as The Three Investigators. John Fairbanks the actor, kept a disgusted distance and Mr Stanley stared at the bird as if he had met the devil in person. But The Three Investigators immediately took the bird to their hearts.

The queue in front of the counter slowly moved on and Jupiter purposely lined up behind the two elderly ladies. He cleared his throat. "Excuse me, Miss Waterstone. What was that secret you mentioned in our journey here?"

Elizabeth Waterstone, the fuller one, immediately turned her head and raised her eyebrows.

Jupiter pushed his luggage a bit further with his foot and then continued: "You said something about a secret you wanted to get on the trail of. Did you say a real ghost?"

Elizabeth looked at her sister with a wink. "Bright-eyed fellow, this boy, isn't he?"

"He could be competition for us, dear."

"Well, my boy," Elizabeth explained in a thoughtful tone and under the scrutinizing gaze of her sister, "this rediscovered Cave of Torture holds a secret. But why do you want to know?"

"Maybe we can help you," Jupiter said to himself. "Mysteries and secrets are our passion."

"We don't know much yet, but you just have to put two and two together..."

"Miss Waterstone, your room keys?" Mr Jennings interrupted her and leaned forward.

"Oh, yeah, it's my turn. Sorry." Before Elizabeth Waterstone turned to Mr Jennings, she whispered to Jupiter: "I'll tell you the rest later... perhaps at dinner... We'll find an opportunity."

The Three Investigators had booked a double room, which had been equipped with an extra bed so that the boys could stay together. All the rooms in the Ghost Castle bore the names of famous writers or movie personalities associated with mystery and horror. Their photos were placed above the door frame.

The Three Investigators were assigned to the room 'Karloff'—named after Boris Karloff. With a slight frown, Pete accepted the keys while Juve took care of the formalities.

Mrs Jennings had set up at the end of the counter and wished The Three Investigators an exciting stay like all the other guests before. She was about to turn to the San Francisco detectives when a blood-curdling scream echoed through the lobby!

Shocked, the boys looked at each other. All conversation died down and John Fairbanks took hold of his heart. But Mrs Jennings remained calm and smiled indulgently. "A little joke of ours," she commented. "You have one of the guests to thank for that sound. If you step on one of the red and blue tiles scattered around the floor, the ghostly screams will be heard. So we ask you to refrain from secret excursions at night!"

"Do you have any more surprises like that in store?" asked John Fairbanks. "For example, what's in this Cave of Torture as mentioned in the brochure?"

"You'll know by tomorrow night." Mrs Jennings smiled authoritatively. "It's over there, by the way." She pointed to a black curtain that moved slightly in the draft. "The cave is truly an attraction. We came across it by chance while building our hotel. It is a long-lost magical place of worship, which we have been trying to recreate... and transform. But don't stick your nose in it. The steel door is locked anyway! And the cave is guarded by the Hooded Executioner!"

The Three Investigators stared in the direction indicated. Suddenly, a black hand appeared and divided the curtain in half. A man stepped out. His face was covered by a black hood. He was wearing a dark, long cloak. In one hand, he held a flashing axe. They could hear a pin drop as it was suddenly so quiet. With a measured step, the Hooded Executioner crossed the lobby and disappeared in the opposite corridor.

#### ***4. Soupe Guillotine***

Mrs Jennings relieved the tension by shouting: “In the evening the Hooded Executioner is still quite harmless, but at night, he is really aggressive! And if you get into his hands, then good luck to you! So you should just stay in bed.”

“Hayley, you needn’t be afraid,” John Fairbanks explained heroically, putting one arm around his companion, but it looked more like he wanted to hold on to her. “It’s all for show.”

“The only thing I’m worried about is you,” the actress replied snappily.

Jupiter grinned, grabbed his luggage, winked at Pete and Bob and turned to the spiral staircase. Directly after The Three Investigators, Althena and Corona climbed the narrow staircase. Their room ‘Christie’—named after Agatha Christie—was next to the boys’.

“Then we can easily keep an eye on each other,” Corona commented smugly as she pushed her bag through the door with her foot.

Mrs Jennings had also come up with a few ideas for the hotel rooms. As was to be expected, the lighting was rather dim. Jupiter quickly recognized the rune-like symbols in the dark wood panelling as mere decoration. The extra bed, which stood directly against the wall, looked like a coffin decorated with three skulls, while the double bed was imaginatively decorated with all kinds of fabled figures.

Bob was the last to enter and he had no time for such trivialities. He dropped his bag and threw himself on the big bed. “I feel so sick. That stupid bumpy ride! I really need to lie down!”

Jupiter looked sympathetically at his friend for a moment, but then continued to inspect the room. He was particularly attracted to the Gothic-inspired decorations on the wardrobe. In order to open it, one had to reach into a gargoyle’s mouth and pull on it. Jupiter tried it out and creaking the doors opened. Inside, glibbery green hangers were waiting to be used.

In the bathroom, there were skull-shaped toothbrush glasses. Disgusting sea animals were painted on the bottom of the bathtub. Wherever Jupe looked, he always discovered gruesome features. He enjoyed the ambience with obvious pleasure.

“Mystery, horror... The decor is right!” he said. “This is more or less how I imagined it! This gives hope for some entertaining days. All that’s missing now are a few nice puzzles!”

“No problem,” Pete shouted through the door. “I’ve just discovered a small bookshelf. Everything from vampires to haunted castles is there. But we don’t have time to read. I want to get something in my stomach!” Pete looked at his watch. “It’s just about dinner time. Bob, are you coming or not?”

Bob only made a humming sound.

“He seems to be in really bad shape,” muttered Jupiter. “Bob, you go get some rest. We’ll save some food for you.”

With some force, Jupiter pulled open the heavy door to the dining room. It creaked loudly. When Pete and he had entered, they stopped and looked around.

The furnishings were in no way inferior to those in the rooms. The giant silver spider crouching under the vaulted ceiling looked even creepier than the photo in the brochure.

Accordingly, the tables were constructed as polygons on which tablecloths with cobweb patterns made the illusion perfect. The small lamps with spider shades were the only source of light besides the pale ceiling lighting.

“Well, *bon appétit*,” wished Pete. “You can hardly see what’s on the plates... Maybe it’s better that way...”

Jupiter passed a table with a chess set where the pieces were incredibly detailed, and meticulously hand-painted skeletons. Then the two of them headed for the table where the two Waterstone sisters had literally trapped poor Mr Stanley between them. Althena and Corona were at the same table and they left three seats for the boys.

“Where did you leave Bob?” Althena asked.

“He’s sleeping in the room,” Jupiter sat down next to Corona, because from there he had a good view of the dining room. Pete chose the chair next to him while Jupiter studied the menu thoroughly.

“Hmm...” Jupe murmured contentedly, “more than I dared hope for—‘Devil’s Roast with Purgatory Sauce’. And before that, a ‘*Soupe Guillotine*’... Excellent.”

Pete looked at him with a frown. “What are you gonna do? You gonna eat some bacon?”

Jupe shook his head. “Nothing against Aunt Mathilda’s cooking, but it’s nice to have a change.”

After ordering his food, Jupiter’s mood had improved considerably. He even turned to the girls and began a conversation about the hotel. The room’s furnishings offered enough material to chat about. In a good mood, he told them about their strange extra bed and Althena and Corona also had a lot to tell.

Suddenly, there was unrest in the dining room. Jupiter looked up and quickly found the cause. At one of the windows, a face had appeared—pale as a ghost against the night.

“The poacher,” Althena said and she leaned back involuntarily.

The man was a frightening sight. Shining out of the thick hair and beard, his eyes scanned the dining room. Now one of the staff members had also noticed. It was Ken—and he jumped towards the window as if to scare away a stray cat. Instantly, the face disappeared.

“You’ve got a nice little goblin in your programme,” one of the guests tried with a joke. “But everything has its limits. Can we have something to eat now?”

“Certainly,” Ken said. He turned as if nothing had happened and waved over to Pat who had been following the scene with a face that was difficult to interpret. “The welcome drink...”

The guests turned back to their table neighbours. A short time later, Pat pushed in a cart with a large pot of soup. The steaming cauldron had been taken off a fireplace that was located in the middle of the dining room. “*Soupe Guillotine!* Help yourself!”

Mr Stanley freed himself from the confines of Waterstones and was the first to fill a bowl with relish. Soon Jupiter joined in, then the other guests. Only Jack Donnelly, the screenwriter from Hollywood, declined, unlike his new acquaintance Susan Dice, who had sat next to him on the train ride and who was his neighbour again in the dining room.

The *Soupe Guillotine* tasted delicious and was probably a tomato soup by and large. Without batting an eyelid, Jupe provided himself with another portion.

When a while later, the ‘Devil’ was brought in, Jupiter’s stomach began to rumble a little. Had he eaten too quickly? But his firm intention was to write the word ‘diet’ in very small letters for a week in relation to food. He gobbled down the Devil’s food as planned. After he had eaten a second helping and two portions of a nightshade dessert, he ordered a hot chocolate.

It had become a little quieter in the dining room and the guests spooned their desserts thoughtlessly. Only Jack Donnelly was incessantly talking. Jupiter watched as Susan Dice silently poured the fourth sachet of sugar into her coffee and also reordered a few more sachets.

Jupiter was finally full.

“When are you going to burst?” Corona asked him with a wink.

“His appetite today was harmless,” Pete interjected before Jupiter opened his mouth. “You should see him in an ice cream parlour. It’s really embarrassing sometimes...”

The First Investigator was much too satisfied to let Pete annoy him. “Now, another ice cream wouldn’t hurt, but I admit, I’m not entirely comfortable.” He grabbed his stomach.

“Strange,” Althena said softly. “I haven’t eaten half as much as you, but I’m not doing so well either... Look at the other guests—we don’t seem to be the only ones who can’t handle the food.”

“Maybe there was something in the food that didn’t belong there,” Corona said and turned to Jupiter with a questioning look.

Jupe fought against a suddenly rising tiredness. During dessert, he had paid less and less attention to his surroundings. But now, when Corona had thrown in the remark, his brain began to work and the first evening in Adventure Hotel ran like a movie once again in front of him.

“One thing is indeed most strange,” he explained after a brief pause. “I have noticed that Jack Donnelly and John Fairbanks did not eat soup. And they are the only two who seem to be still alive.”

“Congratulations!” said Corona with a slightly ironic undertone. “You won first prize in the detective competition not entirely without reason. Although in San Francisco you would only have come second—behind us, because I noticed exactly the same thing a few minutes earlier!”

Jupiter cleared his throat audibly. “You weren’t as busy with the food as I was,” he explained. “Besides, it will be a coincidence, because I can’t imagine that the hotel would allow itself such a joke. The administration of a sleeping pill is clearly beyond what one can expect from a creepy hotel.”

“Perhaps the cook did it quietly and secretly,” Corona thought. “Have you noticed that Ken and Pat, who dined with us, also looked pretty ready for bed too?”

“But who would have an interest in everyone sleeping soundly tonight?” Jupiter asked. His detective brain was already working at full capacity. Perhaps a completely different story was taking place here. The face of the poacher behind the window pane came to his mind. Was there a connection?

Corona held her hand to her mouth and yawned heartily. “If there really was a sleeping pill in the food, it will be very difficult to fight against it. I ate a whole bowl of soup.” She turned to The First Investigator. “And you even got a second helping of soup, Jupiter!”

“But we still have an ace up our sleeves,” Pete said. “Bob is in bed and hasn’t touched a thing. We’ll wake him up and ask him to keep an eye on things at the hotel tonight. Luckily, we are The Three Investigators!”

## 5. Bob Investigates

The dinner party disintegrated quickly after the meal.

Jack Donnelly still tried to persuade Miss Dice to have a beer at Hell's Bar, but she declined with a yawn. Even the staff seemed happy about the early end to the evening, as Jupiter thought he could read from Ken's tired look.

The two investigators dragged themselves up the spiral staircase and at the door to their room, they said good night to Althena and Corona. Jupiter and Pete could feel the tiredness surged up in them. It came all of a sudden, like a mighty devouring stream. Jupiter had to concentrate to find the keyhole and open the door.

Despite their drowsiness, the two of them tried to stay awake as long as possible. Jupe grinned to himself. It must have annoyed the girls off that their colleagues from Rocky Beach were at an advantage with Bob. It was about time to wake him up.

Bob was still sleeping fully clothed across the double bed. Pete and Jupe immediately tried to get their friend awake by shaking him vigorously. Finally, Bob blinked his eyes.

"I have to sit down," moaned Pete. "Just a short rest, Jupe, I promise." He let himself fall onto the chair and closed his eyes.

It took Bob a while to figure out where he was. Jupiter threw a desperate look at Pete, who had fallen asleep within seconds. The sleeping pill seemed to be very strong. Now everything depended on him. The First Investigator fought against fatigue.

"Hey, Jupe, what's wrong with you? You look like a night ghost!" Bob murmured and rubbed his eyes.

"We've been given a sleeping pill, Bob!"

"A sleeping pill?" Now Bob's tiredness was gone for good.

"It must have been in the soup!" The First Investigator gathered all his strength.

"Something must be happening tonight! Among the guests are several rich people. Maybe they are going to be robbed. Remember that poacher..."

Jupiter sat down on the edge of the coffin bed and collapsed. He was too tired to talk anymore.

A slap from Bob woke him up again. "What's wrong, Jupe? Don't fall asleep. Go on!"

"Bob, you have to find out what's going on!" Jupiter threatened to fall asleep again.

"Two guests... haven't eaten any of the soup, as far as we can tell... Actor Fairbanks and... Jack Donnelly."

"Go on."

"You're probably the only one awake..." mumbled Jupiter. "The girls... should be... sleeping as well. Althena has... Watch Fairbanks and Donnelly..."

"Hey! Jupe!"

"Take care of yourself... We can't... help... Try to wake us up..."

"Jupe! Stop! Stay awake!" Bob burst out. "Oh, no! Now he's finally fallen asleep!"

Bob tried to recall what Jupe had said. What was that? Sleeping pill in the soup? Donnelly and Fairbanks didn't eat it. All right, well...

Excitedly, Bob ran back and forth in the room until his eyes fell on Jupe and Pete again. With a blissful smile on his lips, Jupiter lay in the coffin-like extra bed and dreamed while

Pete hung in the armchair, snoring loudly due to the unnatural position of his head.

Finally, Bob decided to take his flashlight out and got ready for a night investigation. When he opened the door, the light went out. Everything in the corridor was dark. The lights seemed to have gone out all over the hotel. No sound came out of the girls' room. No sound could be heard. Everyone seemed to be asleep.

To be on the safe side, he locked The Three Investigators' room from the outside, turned on his flashlight and crept down the corridor. Now he had to be careful not to step on any of those red and blue floor tiles that would cause the screams. If Jupiter's suspicions were correct, there could be at least two persons besides him not affected by the sleeping pill...

Jupiter had said to watch out for Jack Donnelly and John Fairbanks. Fairbanks and Hayley Montgomery stayed in the same corridor as The Three Investigators, just a few rooms away, in the room 'Price'—named after Vincent Price. Bob had overheard the name of their room during check-in.

Quite easily, Bob found the room he was looking for. There was no light coming out from the gap below the door. He switched off the flashlight and put his hand on the handle. It was locked. He bent down and peeked through the keyhole. He could see the faint moonlight shining into the room.

Unexpectedly Bob could see a double bed, in which apparently two people were lying. So all is well, he thought, relieved. Now he should get to Jack Donnelly and then back to bed.

To get to Donnelly's room, Bob first had to go to the reception and leaf through the documents, because he had no idea where the script writer was staying. Bob sneaked back to the stairs. No light came up to him from below either.

Suddenly he heard a noise and flinched. It came from the room right next to him, where Susan Dice stayed. He waited a moment and when nothing else happened, he slowly descended the spiral staircase.

Somebody had to have noticed that the power was out. Was everyone really asleep? And who was it that had put the whole hotel to sleep to do something fishy under the cover of darkness?

Intuitively, Bob turned off the flashlight and continued to grope carefully. The words of Mrs Jennings crept into his head and sat there: '... I must warn you... the Cave of Torture... is guarded by the Hooded Executioner... the skeleton is a sign, there will be a victim in the end...'

As Bob was creeping into the lobby in a stooped position, he shone his flashlight around to make sure that he was alone. In particular, he shone at the night-duty desk and there was nobody there. Perhaps whoever was supposed to be on night duty had eaten the soup and was fast asleep somewhere else.

Bob took a deep breath and crept towards the reception desk. He thought: "Now, quickly find the guest registration book."

He pulled open the drawer and searched around. Finally, he saw the book and took it out. His finger ran across the lines. There it was, Jack Donnelly's room—the last room at the end of the left corridor.

Bob quickly crept to the corridor and made his way to the end. It didn't occur to him that he had forgotten all about the screaming tiles until he was standing in front of the last room. Wait a minute! The power's out so the screaming tiles should not be working.

He glanced at the small photo that was mounted above the door frame. It was a man with a large semi bald head, drooping cheeks and eyelids, not unlike a cocker spaniel—undoubtedly 'Hitchcock'. Bob knew he was at the correct room.

Slowly he pushed the handle down. Jack Donnelly had left the door unlocked. Suddenly it occurred to him that he was breaking into people's rooms—actually, that was usually Pete's job. Also, when Pete inevitably fell into a trap, Jupe and Bob had to rescue him. The problem now was, Bob thought, who would get him out?

He risked a look into the room. It was pitch dark. Donnelly had lowered the shutters. Bob tiptoed into the room. He held his hand in front of the flashlight so it would dim the light when he turned it on.

He took a deep breath and switched on the light. The bed was against the wall. The blanket was rumpled and hung halfway across the edge of the bed. In any case, there was no one on the bed!

Bob shone a light on the desk. There were expensive camera equipment lying there, but what aroused Bob's interest was the script writer's laptop. He wondered what kind of story he was writing. Probably it was worth to take a closer look, he thought. But that would take time. What if Donnelly came back?

Bob saw a wallet next to the laptop. He decided to rummage through it quickly. There were some credit cards and something caught his eye—the cards were in the name of 'Hank Wheeler'. Why Hank Wheeler?

Nervously, he pulled out another card. It was a taxi receipt from Los Angeles—also in the name of Hank Wheeler.

Bob's hands were tingling. He didn't dare to imagine what would happen if Donnelly came back to his room! If the screaming floor tiles were working, he might get a warning if someone stepped on them. Now, he had to be careful and hope there was still time to escape.

Bob jumped to the door. The coast seemed clear. As fast as he could, he left Donnelly's room, ran down the corridor, passed the reception desk and decided to go straight to the opposite wing of the hotel.

The corridor there led to the dining room and, as far as he knew, to the kitchen. To be on the safe side, he slipped through the nearest unlocked door. When he had calmed down a bit, he wondered which room he had entered into. It smelled strange, like a mixture of dust and rubber.

Should he dare turn on the flashlight? Actually, there was no risk. But something made him hesitate. Somehow he had the feeling that he wasn't alone in that room. Didn't he hear a soft grinding sound right next to him?

A shiver ran down his back. It was probably one of those strange surprises the hotel had in store for its guests—a rubber monster or something. But why was it moving in the middle of the night? A light breeze grazed his face and suddenly he heard it. It was another breathing sound, and it was intermittent.

Bob's hand trembled as he looked for the door knob. At last he felt the cold handle. He was just about to push it down when a cool hand settled on his fingers!

His legs failed him as he slumped down. He heard a suffocating sound beside him. And a light came on that blinded him. It was over! He didn't recognize the girl at her first astonished exclamation. But when she whispered: "Bob," no less surprised than he was, he knew who he had before him.

"Althena?"

"Bob! I'm glad—"

"What are you doing here?"

"Well, probably the same as you! Open your eyes! I've been keeping myself awake all evening with great difficulty. It wasn't exactly easy. Corona is dreaming blissfully. But luckily, I had only tasted a little of the soup. Did you find out anything?"



“Jack Donnelly’s not in his bed!”

“I heard noises coming from his room—”

“That was me!” Bob whispered.

Althena looked at him. “If Donnelly is not in his room, then he could be prowling around the hotel!”

Bob turned on his flashlight and looked around. “What is this room, anyway?”

“It’s a storage room for monster costumes—those that they use to frighten the guests... But I found something much more interesting.” She shone a light on a door with ‘Computer Room’ written above it.

“That’s probably where the computers that control the effects in the hotel and the cave are located,” Bob surmised. “Have you looked inside yet?”

“No, there wasn’t time. Shall we?” Althena seemed to see the hesitation on Bob’s face. “Once we’ve examined the computer room, we should go back,” she said. “I’m so tired, I can barely keep myself up anyway. But if someone wants to fool around tonight, I’m sure this room would be a worthwhile destination!” She was undoubtedly right.

Bob nodded. As if to support her suggestion, he went ahead. At the very most, an employee of the hotel was expected in there.

The door was not locked and Bob pulled it open carefully. The lighting system had failed here as well. But the computer was running. It was probably hooked up to a back-up power source. In any case, the bluish image of the monitor flickered towards them from the far end of the long and narrow room.

Carefully the two detectives stepped in. As they passed a work table, they paused. There was a man who had fallen asleep at the table. A long dark coat covered the back of the man, the cap had slipped onto his face covering it. As Bob grazed the back of his head with the beam of his flashlight, the man groaned and began to snore. Bob quickly covered the flashlight with his hand.

Bob believed he had seen enough. “Everything else seems to be fine,” he whispered.

Althena pulled Bob very close to her. “Something’s not right here.” Her voice sounded urgent. “We are not alone in here!”

“Sure. There’s the man who’s sleeping.”

“Not him! The screen saver just came on in the computer! And the way this guy’s sleeping, he couldn’t possibly have been sitting at the computer and working just a few minutes ago!”

Bob was terrified. It was true. Instead of the blue colour, a white ghost on a black background now drew its circles on the monitor.

“Perhaps... maybe the screen saver won’t start for ten minutes, or half an hour, or any time you set it,” Bob tried to explain the observation. “Let’s give it a try.”

He stepped up to the keyboard and pressed a key. Immediately the screen saver disappeared and the main screen appeared. The wording on the screen read ‘The Cave of Torture’. While Althena was checking the clock, Bob looked at the screen. But the clues told him nothing.

Some sort of sequence was programmed here. After a very short time, the monitor switched back to the screen saver.

“One hundred and ninety seconds,” whispered Althena. Her voice sounded fearful.

“Immediately before we entered the room, someone must have tampered with the computer! And that someone is still here! There’s only one exit, right?”

“Let’s quickly check it out,” Bob said and crept further to the back of the room and shone his flashlight around. Althena followed behind.

“Yes, there is only one door,” Bob hissed softly at Althena. “We’ll make an orderly retreat... It’s best to pretend we didn’t notice anything here and just go.”

Bob took a deep breath. “Well, Althena,” he said loudly and with as little prejudice as possible. “Let’s, uh—”

“—Go back to our rooms, yes,” she added. “Here we seem to have got... lost.”

Just as they were about to turn around, they heard a noise behind them. Horrified, they saw the man who had just been fast asleep jumped up and rushed to the exit. Seconds later, he had opened the door and disappeared. With a loud bang, the door slammed shut. Then they heard a scurrying sound coming directly from the other side of the door. Only now did the two detectives begin to move.

“That was no hotel employee!” cried Bob. “Get out of here! It’s a trap!”

## 6. Intruder in the Hotel

Althena and Bob hurried to the exit. The door handle could not be pushed down.

"He has jammed something under the handle on the other side," Bob noted with dismay. "We're locked in!"

"Did you recognize the man?" Althena asked.

Bob let go of the door and shook his head. "The long coat covered his body and the cap covered his face. We really are too stupid. Surprise an intruder and let him trick us! The man must have heard us talking outside. He put on hotel clothes and pretended to be asleep. And as soon as we were not paying attention, he took off."

"There's a telephone over there," Althena said, pointing to the desk. "We can dial all the rooms until we wake up someone to help us."

But when they picked up the phone, they found that the line was dead. Bob pulled the cord until he held its end in his hand.

"We can wait a long time," he said without making a sound. "The phone line's cut. This guy's smart. But only the last round counts, Althena! We gotta get out of here! Who knows, someone might be in danger!"

"Can we break the lock?" Althena asked.

Bob shone at the door. "It looks very sturdy." He took a running start and threw himself against the wood.

"Ow!" Yowling, he held his shoulder and sat down on the floor. "When John Fairbanks does this in his action movies, it always works!"

"Those are just plywood doors," Althena consoled him. "And he's probably wearing some sort of armour under his jacket."

"There must be some way," Bob said. "Hold on!" He shone at the door again, but this time more carefully. The flashlight's beam revealed a gap between the floor and the bottom of the wooden door. "If he's got something under the handle on the other side, we should be able to push it aside from underneath... We need a small, solid object."

"Maybe a ruler," Althena cried and jumped up. She searched the desk and came back with a plastic ruler. Then she knelt down and started poking through the gap. The ruler hit against something solid and with some effort, Althena managed to slowly push the object aside.

Bob pushed the handle down. "We're free," he said in relief and opened the door.

It had been a chair that the intruder had clamped under the door handle. Bob gave it an unkind jolt as the two detectives left the computer room.

"We've yet to find out what Donnelly's up to," Althena said.

Reluctantly, they entered the dark corridor leading to the lobby. After only a few metres, they heard a strange noise.

"What's that?" Althena hissed in horror. It sounded like a faint scratching—metal on metal.

They switched off the flashlights and felt their way along the wall. When Bob, who was walking ahead, reached the corner, he stopped. Althena also paused. The poking could be

heard even more clearly now. Bob tried to imagine the layout of the lobby. And suddenly it was clear to him where the scratching came from.

“The man wants to enter the Cave of Torture. He’s tampering with the steel door,” he whispered and pulled Althena a little back into the corridor. “What shall we do?”

“There are two possibilities,” she breathed. “Either we get out of here, or we get to the bottom of it. It can’t be the Hooded Executioner, or do you believe in ghosts?”

“Of course not!” Bob struggled with himself. “We’re gonna get to the bottom of this,” he decided. “Surprise is on our side. The man still thinks that we’re trapped in the computer room.”

“Plus, we’re the best detectives in California,” Althena whispered. “So we creep closer, tear the black curtain to the side and switch on the flashlights on command. Then we shine them right in his face. We take advantage of the man’s moment of terror and flee. The guy won’t even recognize us if we blind him.”

“Most of all, we’ll get to see who he is!” Bob agreed.

It sounded easy. They went around the corner. It was so dark, they couldn’t see their hand in front of their eyes. Bob remembered that there was a lamp in the lobby and three chairs and a coffee table. Somewhere there was the old knight’s armour.

And where was Blackeye, the talking bird? Was he asleep? Bob hoped he wouldn’t give them away with his squawking!

Slowly they groped their way further. Suddenly the scratching stopped. At once, Bob and Althena paused. Now they heard a rattling sound of breathing—something jingling.

A reddish glow came up behind the black curtain in the form of a shadow that gave a glimpse of the figure that was behind it. Bob’s heart was in his mouth. Was that really a human being? Maybe there was something to Maggie Jennings’s announcement that there was actually a ghost walking around at night, called the Hooded Executioner?

Suddenly the dark figure turned around and two red glowing eyes stared at them through the thin fabric of the black curtain. Bob tried to keep a cool head. Jupiter would now have assured him emphatically that there were no ghosts. He would stop and simply tear off the mask of the intruder—at least he would try—if it wasn’t too dangerous for him. Now Pete was also pushing himself in Bob’s inner eye, and with it, the impulse to just run away.

Bob stepped imperceptibly backwards. His foot got caught in the carpet and he stumbled backwards. And he used his hands to try to get a grip. Suddenly he grabbed something cold and metallic, and he clung to it desperately. Immediately it gave way. With a deafening clatter, everything went down. Bob finally fell over backwards. The flashlight hit the floor and rolled away.

That was the starting signal for the dark figure. With a scream, he ripped the curtain to the side. Althena moaned and retreated. Firm, heavy steps came closer. The glowing red eyes moved towards Bob. A throaty breathing could be heard. Bob tried to get his hands on something to fight back with. He touched something metallic and cold. The red eyes were right above him. The executioner bent down and his arm stretched out to Bob.

The dark figure then rattled: “The Hooded Executioner... will get you now!”

Bob froze. It was pure horror! Then Althena turned on her flashlight.

The executioner was even more powerful than Bob had imagined. Althena had pointed the flashlight directly at the attacker. His face was hidden under a dark hood from which the two red eyes shone. Bob did not dare to move.

But the attacker paused, irritated by Althena’s beam of light. Only now did he seem to realize that there was someone else there. Slowly he pulled his arm away from Bob and

turned his piercing eyes in Althena's direction. She shivered and the beam of her flashlight suddenly drew a confused zigzag line on the wall.

Althena let out a choked scream. At that moment, Bob grabbed one of the metal pieces between which he was lying. Without knowing what it was, he hurled it at the dark figure. It hit him in the back. There was a loud clatter as something fell to the ground. The Hooded Executioner jumped to the side.

For a moment, Bob feared he was about to pounce on Althena. But the ghostly intruder fled. With long, quick strides, he sped away and disappeared into the darkness. Then they heard a creak.

Althena had recognized the sound. "The dining room!" she exclaimed. A fine breeze blew past. The door closed again. Then there was silence.

Bob struggled to get up. Although he was shaking all over, he tried to keep his posture. "The most sensible thing to do... is... to go back to our rooms!"

"I'm for it!" Althena replied.

When the girl disappeared into her room, Bob took a deep breath outside his room. He hesitated briefly and thought. Then he went back down the stairs. He decided to check out the dining room. That was where the Hooded Executioner had disappeared into. By now, he was probably long gone... Perhaps he had left a trail...

Carefully Bob opened the door to the dining room. He immediately sensed that something was wrong. A light breeze was blowing across his face. Bob entered the room. It was brighter in the dining room than in the corridors of the hotel because the moonlight fell in here, and Bob could make out the dark spider on the ceiling.

The Hooded Executioner was nowhere to be seen. Bob looked around and his eyes fell on one of the windows which was open. Had the Hooded Executioner fled that way?

When he stepped up to the window, something crunched under his feet. Bob bent down and felt the ground. It was broken glass. One of the six small window panes was broken. Had someone broken into the hotel? Bob decided he'd seen enough for now. Carefully, he began to retreat and went back upstairs.

Only when he had closed his room door behind him did he slowly take a breather. The light still didn't work and he had to use his flashlight to see what was going on. Jupiter and Pete was still sleeping—probably Pete was dreaming of surfing and Jupe was dreaming of a colourful surprise ice cream in the beach bar. They should not be disturbed, Bob decided.

Pete was still hanging in his armchair in a completely unnatural position. With a lot of effort, Bob managed to pull his friend onto the double bed. Then he lay down next to it, clamped his flashlight to the bed frame and opened a fantasy best-seller he had brought with him.

After the second page, he too, fell asleep.

Bob was woken by something annoying right next to him.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

It was Pete's alarm clock. Bob blinked distractedly into the morning sun while Pete next to him tried by all means to ignore the hated noise.

Jupiter on the other hand was already rubbing his eyes. "Bob, please throw that thing out!"

"You set the alarm yourself!"

"Yes, but that was yesterday before dinner."

Bob managed to silence the alarm clock. He felt as if he had just fallen asleep. Still, he was eager to tell what he had experienced that night.

“Fellas, we have a new case,” he announced when Pete finally understood the alarm clock’s message. “Things are happening at the hotel that are not part of the adventure programme.”

It took almost twenty minutes for Bob to tell his friends everything in detail. This was not least due to the many questions that Jupiter asked.

When Bob finally had nothing more to say, Jupiter stood up and bowed as if for fun. “It is exceptionally annoying that I was, so to speak, indisposed last night... but you have done an excellent job, Bob! Especially you deserve respect for having the courage to go check out the dining room!”

Bob felt pride rising in him. “But we would be nothing without your powers of deduction, Jupe,” he said. “I’m sure you’ve thought about what had happened.”

Jupiter nodded as if that was not worth mentioning. “Of course I see one or two possibilities,” he said modestly. “But there are still plenty more questions than answers... for example, what role does Jack Donnelly play? Why is his credit card in a different name? In the first place, is that even his credit card? What kind of script is he writing? Who was the man in the computer room? ... Then the broken window glass... Why would Jack Donnelly break into the hotel when he already stays in it? Could someone else be behind it? ... What about the poacher? What role does he play? Were there really two people out there? What was the person looking for in the Cave of Torture? Why was the power out? Who put the sleeping pill in the soup? What secret did the two Waterstone sisters talk about last night and on the train ride here? Where was Blackeye the bird when Bob and Althena surprised the Hooded Executioner?”

“Enough, enough,” Pete interrupted, laughing. “What I’d like to know is whether the Hooded Executioner is a real ghost?”

“Of course it is a human being,” Jupiter explained as expected. “The disguise was a security measure of the perpetrator to avoid being recognized... and it worked.”

“Where did he get the cloak so quickly?” Pete asked.

“Speaking of the man in the computer room, it was easy for him to slip on the disguise as a camouflage on his escape through the storage room—that’s where the costumes are stored,” replied Jupiter.

“Then I’ll bet on Donnelly,” Pete said. “Because it can’t be the poacher—at least that’s what Bob should have realized. Surely he can’t hide that much hair?”

“With a mask and a cap, it’s perfectly possible,” Jupe thought. “But admittedly, that sounds rather unlikely.”

“Okay, suppose it was Donnelly,” Pete asked, “then what was he looking for?”

“And why is he breaking into the hotel?” Bob added. “Maybe... because he went out to get something and forgot the key?”

Jupiter was thinking. “It’s possible,” he relented. “But everything leads to one goal—the cave! What is the secret of the Cave of Torture?”

## 7. A Big White Lie

“The secret of the Cave of Torture... I would like to know that too,” Pete said. “Now you have the puzzle that you were looking for in this trip, Jupe!”

“And if I could add one more thing,” Bob said. “I’d like to know where Blackeye is.”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “There can be a very simple reason. He’s probably locked in a cage at night. These birds are better kept in aviaries anyway, not on a wooden pole like a parrot. Why don’t we ask Mrs Jennings?”

The Three Investigators cleaned themselves up superficially, changed their clothes and left the room. Bob was dreadfully tired, but he was mighty proud of the praise that Jupiter had given to him—something which the First Investigator rarely did.

As they descended the spiral staircase, they saw Pat, who was in the process of reassembling the knight’s armour. Like Ken, he was a strong man of about forty. He had not yet noticed The Three Investigators. Neither had Mrs Jennings, who was standing at the steel door leading to the Cave of Torture, checking out something. She had pulled the curtain to one side.

“Someone has tampered with the door. What on earth went on last night?” The manager of the hotel seemed very upset. “I wonder if it was the poacher. That guy is really worrying us. He’s scaring away our guests with his unkempt appearance. I don’t believe in ghosts that can’t be programmed.”

“So far he hasn’t done anything to us,” Pat objected.

But Mrs Jennings wasn’t listening. “Wasn’t Ken on night duty?”

“He was asleep in his room the whole night, Mrs Jennings,” Pat replied, tinkering with the armour.

“But that’s impossible! Ken is ever so reliable.”

“Everyone was asleep, not just Ken,” said Pat. “Mrs Jennings, you were also very tired last night and went to bed early.”

“What’s that got to do with it?” Mrs Jennings said. “Anyway, I have a nasty headache today.”

“You’re not the only one!” Pat replied. “The mood is not the best. It must have been the food.”

“You mean it was spoiled? But that is—”

“—A sleeping pill,” said Pat. “I used to take such pills like that sometimes. I know that feeling when the effects kick in.”

“A sleeping pill in our food? But Teddy was in the kitchen the whole time!”

“Are you sure, ma’am?”

“I’ll ask him.”

Jupiter coughed discreetly. He thought it appropriate to interfere in the conversation now.

“We noticed that the power was cut off last night, Mrs Jennings,” he said, “and so the alarm did not work. May I offer you our assistance? If you remember, we’re The Three Investigators from Rocky Beach.”

Surprised, Maggie Jennings took a step forward. Jupe noticed that she was holding a dark rolled up fabric in her hand.

“What do you know about this?” she asked.

“Nothing yet.” Jupiter put on his businesslike smile. “We too were victims of the mysterious sleeping pill and would now like to shed light on this matter... Ma’am, are the windows secured by the alarm system?”

“Yes,” Mrs Jennings said. “Well, if anyone tampers with them, there will be a loud buzzing sound that can be heard all over the building... But it won’t work without the power supply.”

“Ah, yes. By the way, may I ask what you’re holding in your hand?”

Mrs Jennings looked at the dark bundle as if she had just noticed it.

“It’s the Hooded Executioner’s cloak, isn’t it?” Jupiter asked.

Mrs Jennings nodded.

“I would be interested to know where you found it. Probably outside, or am I wrong?”

“Say, how did you know that?” She looked suspiciously at Jupiter. “It was actually found in the bushes. Listen, if you really want to help me, you can do that. If you want to know more about the set-up, talk to Pat.”

But Jupiter was not satisfied with her answer. “One more question, Mrs Jennings. Will you notify the police?”

Mrs Jennings hesitated a moment. Then she shook her head.

“We’ll handle it by ourselves. A police operation would not go down well with my guests. Word gets around. And we’re still working on our reputation. Besides, the attack with the sleeping pill hasn’t been proven at all... Young man, I would ask you not to discuss this with the other guests.” She turned to leave. “I will apologize to my guests later for the excessive amount of... uh... rum in the dessert. It made us all a little tired.”

After Mrs Jennings left, The Three Investigators looked at each other.

“She is blaming it on alcohol,” Pete said in a soft voice. “That’s a big white lie! There was never any rum in that dessert!”

“Mrs Jennings is worried about the reputation of her hotel,” Jupe whispered. “That is understandable, but there are other ways to go about it.”

Then Jupiter approached Pat who had just finished assembling the armour.

“Hi, Pat,” he said. “Mrs Jennings asked us to help her figure out what happened last night. Will you please show us the hotel’s electricity supply?”

“Come on!” said Pat.

The employee led them into the computer room, which Bob knew from his nightly outing. On the way there, Pat explained, not without pride, that the hotel had its own power supply.

“It is cheaper than running a line through the rough terrain,” he said. “At the top of the mountain on which the hotel is built is Bear Lake. We diverted some water from the lake and led it through an underground pipe. That drives a turbine that provides us with electricity.”

In the meantime, The Three Investigators had arrived in the computer room and Pat opened a box that was attached to the wall. “Look, the main power switch is in this box. When I checked this morning, it was flipped. It’s as simple as that. That’s why the power was off.”

Jupiter frowned. “There’s really no power line outside the hotel?”

“No. The whole hotel is hooked up to that generator. But the computer has a backup battery.”

“About the cave... why is it so well secured?” Jupiter had raised a delicate point.

Pat turned visibly. “Well, there had been an accident. The rock above us is very porous. Water was seeping into the cave. The steel door is a protective measure to keep the hotel safe



at all costs. But don't tell Mrs Jennings that you heard this from me. She doesn't like people talking about it. The guests might get scared."

Pat was visibly overwhelmed by the questions as he led The Three Investigators out of the computer room. "You'll be visiting Bear Lake and the waterfall," he said as they returned to the lobby, and his tone became more official again. "The trip to the lake is on the programme today."

"Thank you, Pat," Jupe said. "By the way, when was the hotel built?"

"We started building over a year ago," Pat replied. "The opening was six months ago."

"Did this poacher already live in the area at that time?" Jupiter suddenly asked.

It was clearly visible in Pat's face that this was an unpleasant question. Nevertheless, he forced himself to an answer. "I guess he's been here for a long time. Up in the woods, he has an old log cabin. We never found out more about him, but that wasn't necessary either. He always left us in peace."

Jupiter nodded. "By the way, we overheard the conversation about the sleeping pill earlier. It seemed to me that you doubt that Teddy Jennings never left the kitchen last night?"

"He's not always in the kitchen," Pat said. "Sometimes, he is in the wine cellar, or he checks on the guests."

Pat turned around and tried to go back to the dining room, but Bob held him back for a moment. "Pat, one last question. Where is Blackeye?"

"The bird? I don't know. When we went to get him out of his cage this morning, he was gone!"

## 8. Ghost Stories

The breakfast buffet looked splendid—and it was presented in style in darkly decorated plates and bowls. But hardly any of the guests had an eye for it that morning.

The Three Investigators quickly realized that most of the conversations at the tables centred around events from the last night. The broken window sparked their imagination and many people were also surprised about the strangely deep sleep. At least Mrs Jennings seemed to have relaxed the situation a bit. However, The Three Investigators did not get the impression that the guests were eager to get on with business as usual.

At one of the windows was Ken. He had just finished putting in a new pane of glass. Corona and Althena had assisted him. The Three Investigators went over to greet them, and then proceeded to the table of the Waterstone sisters on Jupiter's instructions. The two curious ladies had skilfully placed themselves in a corner of the dining room from where they could watch everything closely. Elizabeth pointed invitingly to the free chairs and The Three Investigators sat down.

"We were unable to continue our conversation yesterday," Elizabeth Waterstone began, leaning forward. "Do you actually believe in this nonsense?"

"Excuse me?" Bob asked.

"Well, the thing about the rum in dessert," Elizabeth laughed. "That Mrs Jennings must be pretty nervous to give such an excuse. And Ken as well! He said that the window was shattered by the storm outside... But we can put the pieces together, can't we, Cynthia?"

Cynthia Waterstone checked her tied up hair and nodded.

Elizabeth bent over. "It was the Hooded Executioner who visited us last night," she said meaningfully. "And the real one—not the one we saw when we arrived yesterday. That was just an actor, of course. But last night, the real ghost came! He wanted us all out of here! He left a sign—his black cloak. It was hanging out in the bushes. That was supposed to be a warning!"

"But Lizzy," her sister said. "You mustn't scare the young people like that. One is already quite pale."

"Pete, pull yourself together," Jupe growled inaudibly. Out loud, he continued: "How did you come to believe that the Hooded Executioner is a ghost?"

The two Waterstone sisters looked at each other. Cynthia nodded imperceptibly.

Then Elizabeth took over and said so quietly that they could hardly hear her: "It happened about two years ago. A group of young students camped up there near Bear Lake, led by their professor... They were students of anthropology, you know, those people who study human societies and cultures. A storm was coming, similar to the one that is brewing here right now." She looked outside. Thick clouds obscured the sun and made the colours fade. "The young students were looking for something. It was about a secret Indian cave that their professor had heard about while studying ancient documents."

"The Cave of Torture?" Pete said in a flash.

Elizabeth Waterstone nodded and continued: "You said it. The cave was where a candidate had to pass a torturous test to become a chief. The name 'Cave of Torture' comes

from Mrs Jennings, who is always looking for exciting names to impress her guests. Anyway, the students found nothing—nothing at all. The whole thing seemed to be a myth.

“Now, in the middle of the night, Walt, Professor Anderson’s favourite student, suddenly went off. No one knows why. He left the camp in a storm and fog and was never seen again. The group searched obsessively for their fellow student for three days. But when the food supplies ran out, they left the area without finding any trace of him. Subsequent rescue operations were carried out, but he could not be found. What a terrible thing!”

“And we believe Walt found the cave that night,” Cynthia said triumphantly. “He entered it and he had to die—for such ancient places are often cursed.”

“Mrs Jennings told us about a skeleton in the cave,” Elizabeth Waterstone took a hearty bite on a jam roll. “All you have to do is figure out what happened. And now the cave has been discovered and is made as an attraction for the guests of this hotel. Already a ghost walks through the hotel and tries to keep the guests away from the cave. I tell you—this ghost is none other than the ghost of... Walt!” Then she fell silent.

At that moment, the door opened and Jack Donnelly entered. After a searching look around, he decided to sit at the table of John Fairbanks and Hayley Montgomery. Bob followed him so suspiciously with his gaze that even the Waterstones noticed.

“He’s a screenwriter from Hollywood,” said Elizabeth Waterstone, chomping her jam roll. “I haven’t been able to find out what scripts he’s written yet, though.”

Jupiter grinned at the Waterstones. “I suppose your curiosity knows no bounds? Have you found out anything about us?”

Inquisitiveness was obviously Elizabeth’s department. She took another bite and said: “Of course! You three won the Los Angeles Detective Competition. And those two girls over there by the window, are the winners from San Francisco. They were sitting with us earlier. Robert told me that of all the detectives teams he had worked with—” She got a glare from her sister and interrupted herself immediately.

But Jupiter had paid close attention. “You mentioned the name ‘Robert’. Do you know Robert Woodbridge—the millionaire who organized the detective competition?”

“Fleetingly,” Elizabeth answered and shoved the rest of her jam roll into her mouth.

Without delay, Cynthia went on talking. “We meet many people. We are members of the Santa Monica Paranormal Club, which Robert visits occasionally... not to say that we are one of the founding members.”

“So you’re on the hunt for real ghosts?” Bob asked. “Have you come across any?”

Elizabeth and Cynthia nodded. “Of course. Unfortunately, it could never be proven... but that’s about to change. We’re sure there’s a real spirit at work here. All the signs point to it. The bewitched food, shattered window, a knight’s armour fell down and a bird disappeared... Then there’s a mysterious cave guarded by a Hooded Executioner... a skeleton... a missing person.”

“Well, one of the mysteries can be solved quickly,” Bob threw in a bit hastily. Before Jupiter’s warning glance met him, he had already added: “I knocked over the armour last night.”

The Waterstones stared at him in surprise. “You were out here? Last night? ... So, did you see anything... the real ghost?”

“Yes... uh... no... I met the Hooded Executioner... that’s right, but it wasn’t a ghost; it was simply...” Bob mumbled helplessly.

“Yes?”

“It was someone... but I don’t know who,” Bob had to admit.

The eyes of the Waterstones were shining. “We are on the right track, Lizzy!” Cynthia triumphed.

A little later, Maggie Jennings stepped in and reminded the group that they would be meeting in an hour for a white-water rafting trip through the gorge that led to Bear Lake. Like the other guests, The Three Investigators decided to change clothes for the trip. Bob wanted to wait for Althena, but Jupiter pulled him into their room before she came up the stairs.

“You’ll have to do without your fans.”

“What’s up, Jupe?”

“We should now put the results of our work in order.”

Reluctantly, Bob closed the door behind him. He would have loved to hear from Althena what the two girls had found out earlier. Sometimes Jupiter could be quite stubborn.

They sat down around the small table that stood in front of the window. Pete and Bob strained to look at the witch masks with which it was decorated while they waited patiently for Jupiter to start.

Jupe got hold of a pencil and some pieces of paper. Apparently he had big plans. On the first sheet, he wrote: ‘Theory 1—The Poacher’.

“So that’s the main suspect?” Pete asked.

Jupe shook his head. “He’s not my prime suspect.”

“But the break-in was his doing?” Pete added.

At that moment, something struck Bob and he exclaimed: “The break-in was faked! There was no intruder!”

Pete looked at him with a slightly annoyed look, which he usually saved for Jupiter when The First Investigator was one thought ahead.

“Don’t you understand?” Bob continued. “The alarm would’ve gone off and we would’ve heard it!”

“But the power was off,” Pete tried to reason.

Now Jupiter intervened. “As we learned from Pat, you can only cut the power off if you are inside the building. There is no line on the outside. The burglar would hardly have conjured himself into the building to cut off the power so he could go back out and re-enter through the window.”

“Jupe, I think I understood that,” Pete said.

The First Investigator made a few notes on the sheet, then he pulled out the second sheet and wrote: ‘Theory 2—Jack Donnelly’.

“Donnelly did not sleep in his bed last night,” Bob explained. “He did not take any soup. And it’s possible he’s using a false name. To me, he’s the prime suspect. But we lack any trace of a motive. What did he want to do in the cave? I guess we have a lot of investigating to do if we want to find out his secret.”

Jupiter nodded and wrote down a few sentences. He remembered the scene during the train ride when Donnelly had pretended to read a book. Then he pulled out another page and wrote: ‘Possible Motives’.

“A motive could be inferred from a statement made by Mrs Jennings,” Bob said. “The hotel is newly opened. It still has to gain reputation. Perhaps someone either wants to harm Mrs Jennings or disrupt the hotel operations.”

Jupiter’s pen flew across the paper. “Not bad, Bob. If that’s true, then one of the employees could be the culprit... or maybe Donnelly is acting for someone else. That means

investigation. But the hotel could also disturb the poacher. It's right in the middle of his domain."

"Then why didn't he intervene before now?" Bob suggested. "He had months to do this before the hotel opened."

"And then there's the ghost story of the two old ladies," Pete remarked.

"Not so fast, fellas." Jupiter grinned and wrote the words: 'Theory 3—The Millionaire' on another piece of paper.

"What's all this about?" Bob asked in amazement. "You mean Robert Woodbridge, who gave us this trip? What's he got to do with this hotel business?"

"A 'Jupiter Special Theory'," Jupiter replied. "Let's leave it at that for now. I am simply not sure enough about my conjecture. When I have a few more clues, I will—"

Pete twisted his eyes annoyingly. "We know that, Jupe! One day, to everyone's surprise, you'll conjure the solution out of the hat like a rabbit and we will cheer and clap our hands in approval!"

At that moment, there was a knock on the door, and that prevented Jupiter from replying. Bob shouted: "Come in!" and to the surprise of the detectives, Althena entered.

"Corona wants to see you, Jupiter," she said. "She wants to discuss something with you."

In a hurry, Jupiter shoved his papers together. "Then just ask her to come in."

"She wants to talk to you in private..." Althena said. "She's waiting in our room. I'll stay here until then."

With a frown, Jupiter got up and left the room.

## 9. The Three Tests

Althena sat down with Pete and Bob and forced a smile. It was clear to her what she thought about the matter.

"My friend is sometimes horrible," she said. "There are situations where Corona is so bossy that I feel very small."

"We know that feeling, believe us," Pete agreed with her.

"Then she talks so big that I can't understand a word she's saying."

"Hmm," Pete mumbled.

"This morning we did some investigations. We talked to Ken, talked to Teddy Jennings—a nice man, by the way—the Waterstone sisters, and just now with the actor. And now Corona's got something brewing—some idea she's keeping to herself. She says if she's sure about it, she'll tell me in time."

Pete and Bob winked at each other and nodded.

"And suddenly she comes up with a solution out of nowhere that astonishes everyone, including me. I can only nod approvingly. It's not always easy, always playing second fiddle."

"We understand," Bob agreed with her.

"Jupiter has somehow taken a liking to her. I have no idea why. Perhaps because they—"

"They are similar in many respects," Bob added.

"Yeah, maybe. I'm curious to see what they'll come up with," Althena said. "By the way, Corona has forbidden me to continue talking to you about what happened last night. I almost suspect that because she was not with me last night, so now she is taking it out on me."

Bob grinned tellingly and saw that Althena's gaze fell on the papers, which were now on the table, face down. All this secrecy suddenly got on her nerves.

Then the door opened and Jupiter returned. With an important face, he sat down at the table. "You can go back over there, Althena."

"Oh, great!"

When Althena had left, Jupiter announced: "Corona and I have come to the same conclusion, but we want to wait a little longer before we talk about it. Therefore we have made an agreement... Until further notice, the two detective teams will work separately, but at full speed."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a paper. "Corona gave me this. The two girls found a note this morning between the pieces of the knight's armour. I wrote down the lines."

Curious, Pete and Bob bent over the paper. It said:

*Three tests of the eagle for life or death;  
See the three rocks on which our dominion is built;  
You have power and strength;  
You have intelligence and courage;  
But do you also possess wisdom?  
Only then will you have the treasure to make you a chief.*

Jupiter waited until Pete and Bob had read the text, but both of them did not say or comment on anything, so he continued: "The Hooded Executioner must have lost this. Althena found it when she helped Pat collect the armour parts this morning. I guess it is a translation of an Indian verse. It must have something to do with this cave and I'm sure we'll come up with the solution tonight when Maggie Jennings finally opens the door and invites us into the cave!"

Suddenly Jupiter looked at his watch. "Oh my goodness! We urgently have to get ready! The minibuses to Bear Lake are leaving soon."

Bob and Pete obediently stood up. While they were gathering their things together, the two agreed that they would suspend their detective work until their leader came clean with them. The fact that he has recently made an agreement with Corona and not with his colleagues was definitely too much for them.

Half an hour later, The Three Investigators were sitting in the minibus with other guests, bumping along a forest path that led them to the gorge that the torrent had carved into the porous rock on its way to Bear Lake over an eternity of time.

With a bit of luck, the boys had managed to ride in the same minibus as Jack Donnelly and Susan Dice. Donnelly had packed his photographic equipment and was constantly twirling around the lenses. Susan Dice just looked at the landscape. They both looked calm and collected.

Teddy Jennings led the excursion and the two minibuses were driven by Pat and Ken. They had packed their life jackets and helmets, as the programme included a gentle white-water rafting through the gorge before heading to Bear Lake, where a picnic lunch would be served at the lakeside. Afterwards, the plan was to relax at the lake before heading back to the hotel for dinner.

Earlier during the excursion briefing in the hotel lobby, Maggie Jennings had not forgotten to point out the scary aspect. The white-water rafting was not dangerous in itself, but there were a few surprises in several places she didn't want to reveal. However, Bob wasn't focussed on the upcoming adventures. He was too busy thinking about what had happened to him last night and what Jupiter was hiding from them. It annoyed him that he didn't come up with a decisive idea, and that sparked off Jupiter to, once again, decide what they should and should not do. Nevertheless, Bob calmly went through all the events again.

When Ken stopped the minibus at the bank of the torrent after about an hour, Bob had found what he was looking for. It was actually quite obvious. But somehow he had the slight inkling that Jupiter was on the wrong track. The guests got out to look at the three black rubber boats that Maggie Jennings had effectively decorated with skull pictures.

Bob waited for a suitable moment, and then said to Jupiter as casually as possible: "It seems very far-fetched to me to think that the millionaire has staged a contest between the two detective teams to find the ultimate winners of the California detective competition."

"Excuse me?" Jupiter looked at him with a mixture of surprise and irritation.

Bob grinned to himself. He had hit the mark. "Well, it may be true that Woodbridge whispered the story of the cave to the two Waterstone sisters. After all, he knows the two ladies from their Paranormal Club. It's not too difficult to hire someone to perform the Hooded Executioner's act. Then there is a note with mysterious verse lying around, and the two detective teams pick up the scent. The hunt for the great secret begins. Which of them will be the first? Woodbridge, the millionaire, has posed his last big puzzle. It's all possible. But I just don't believe it!"

“You don’t believe it?”

“No,” Bob said. “That sounds too much like mind games to me. And so I think it’s pretty silly that you and Corona have entered into this test of strength.”

“Do you have a better explanation for what happened in the hotel?” There was an unpleasant undertone in Jupiter’s voice. Bob and Pete knew him only too well—the First Investigator was offended.

So Bob said carefully: “No, unfortunately not, but I don’t want to ruin your theory either. However, I’d like to follow up on the lead I gave you on Jack Donnelly. It seems he’s using a false name. Is he part of this game that Woodbridge is playing with us? Or is he up to something else entirely?”

“And where is he anyway?” Pete interjected. They looked around. Donnelly was nowhere to be found. Susan Dice, on the other hand, had already donned a life jacket and helmet, and was seated nicely in the boat that was to take off first.

“Let’s ask his new crush,” Bob suggested and went towards the boat she was in.

Susan looked at him kindly. “Join in!” she invited Bob and moved a little to the side.

“Thank you.” Bob stopped. “I’ll take a later boat. I was just looking for Jack Donnelly and I thought I’d ask you—”

“Jack can’t take boat rides. He has decided to walk through the forest to the lake. You can meet him later.”

“Oh, yeah...” In a hurry, Bob turned around.

Donnelly was gone. Bob was annoyed with himself. For a moment, he wasn’t paying attention and Jack had slipped through his fingers.

Jupiter and Pete took it easy—Jupiter, because he was following a different theory than Bob anyway; and Pete, because since he had seen the boats, he had nothing but white-water rafting in his head. As anxious as he usually was, when sport came into play, all the inner warning lights went out.

Bob looked around and saw Corona. She was alone. Bob was sure that the two girls had taken better care of Donnelly than The Three Investigators and that Althena had long since begun the pursuit.

Teddy Jennings interrupted his thoughts. Together with Ken and Pat, he had just finished distributing the life jackets and helmets. It took a while until all belts were properly fastened and Ken could give the start command for the first boat.

Susan Dice and a few other brave people slipped into the waters, which at this point still looked very harmless. A few minutes later, the passengers of the second boat got ready.

Although Pete was eager to get going, Jupiter and Bob hesitated and decided to wait for the third boat to be with the Waterstone sisters and Mr Stanley, who had clung himself to the two ladies as usual. The third boat was only released into the water after a few minutes to maintain a safety distance from the second boat.

Teddy gave the command to go. In the beginning their nerves were spared, because the ride was a smooth glide on the flowing stream. But soon the situation changed. Smaller rapids accelerated the pace and gave the ride an uneven and surprising rhythm.

On the gorge walls, Bob discovered drawings with thick black lines which reminded him of parietal art typically found on cave walls, but in this case, he believed that Maggie Jennings had a hand to it.

They turned towards a narrow dark gorge whose entrance seemed to attract them faster and faster. Undaunted, Teddy focussed on steering the boat. Suddenly, the atmosphere changed. The sound of the water was reflected from the walls in such an eerie way that



shivers ran down the back of the guests. In an impressive way, this testified to the strength of nature and the destructive power of water.

Suddenly behind the boat, a strong roar broke out as if a huge wave was rolling in. Bob thought of another impressive interlude until his gaze fell on Teddy Jennings's surprised face. Something was wrong here. Teddy's movements were suddenly very hectic. Bob turned back and froze. A huge mountain of water was shooting towards the boat. The waves splashed up on both sides of the narrow rock faces, which drove the water on them and increased the speed.

"Goodness!" cried Teddy. "Hold on!"

Where did the wild water suddenly come from? Bob had read about fatal accidents during water rafting in the newspapers often enough. As it was, they were headed straight for one. It was an uncontrolled, monstrous force that took the little boat in its grasp within seconds, playing with it like a ping-pong ball and against which the passengers had absolutely no chance. They were shaken about like on a hellish roller-coaster ride.

Bob looked ahead in panic. A jagged rock formation appeared and seemed to be just waiting to spear the rubber boat and tear it apart!

## 10. Stranded at the Lakeside

At the last second, Teddy Jennings managed to steer the boat past the dangerous rock. The waves pushed the boat down a cascade, made it hit a rock and finally wedged it diagonally between the rock wall and a deteriorating tree trunk.

The passengers were completely shaken up. Bob was still clinging with both hands to the rope on the upward-projecting side of the boat. Below him, the water was rushing. Suddenly, Bob felt something grabbed on to his leg. Immediately, he tried to shake it off.

“Stop it, Bob!”

“Jupe!”

There was a loud splashing and with a side glance, Bob could tell that Jupe was half swimming, half crawling, trying to cling on to the boat with the flowing water. The water was now flowing again at its usual strength and the wet ambush seemed like a bad dream. Ahead of them was the calm turquoise blue of Bear Lake.

Bob looked among the passengers. His eyes fell on the two Waterstone sisters, completely drenched and terribly pale. They crouched in the triangle that formed the bow of the boat. Fortunately, nothing bad had happened to them.

Wait a minute! Pete was missing! And Mr Stanley was missing too! They seemed to have been thrown out during the wild ride.

Teddy Jennings had noticed it as well. Shouting loudly, he set out to search between the small rapids. Bob followed him. The water was not cold, but it was not easy to find hold between the rocks.

As Bob held on to a boulder to look for Pete, he noticed a short flash from the top of the gorge. The sun must have been reflected in something. Bob looked more closely and just managed to see Jack Donnelly's head disappearing behind a cliff. Before he could think of anything else, he heard that Teddy had found Pete.

The Second Investigator was stuck helplessly between washed up branches, and together, Bob and Mr Jennings managed to free Pete. Apart from a slight sprain in his ankle, he had not been harmed, so he could even help to search for Mr Stanley.

Shortly afterwards, they found the missing man. Wet as a sponge, Mr Stanley cowered on a rocky shore where he'd saved himself. He had lost his helmet but he was not hurt.

Meanwhile, Jupiter had also got back on the boat and he was visibly relieved when he saw Bob and Pete coming back.

All in all, they were all very lucky.

It took quite a while until all the passengers had arrived safely at the lakeside and they started to exchange their experiences.

Nothing had happened to the passengers of the first boat. They were already at the lakeside when the surge of water approached. The second boat had got it worse. It had tipped over at the end of the gorge, but the passengers had managed to reach the lakeside safely. Pale as a ghost, the actor leaned against a tree and recovered from his involuntary dive, while his girlfriend helped the passengers of the third boat, who had been hit hardest.

After the first shock was digested, the questions followed. Mr Stanley was shaking like a leaf from the wet, from shock, from excitement or a combination of all of these. He demanded an unequivocal explanation from Mr Jennings.

But the manager of the hotel was at a loss. "I... I'm very sorry, of course," he said. "I can't explain what happened either. It was... an accident... We've never had this before..."

"Is there a dam above the river?" Jupiter meddled in his awkward babble.

Mr Jennings nodded. "Of course, yes. We have installed a simple system to regulate the water. It is located not far from our departure point. Our boat trips are supposed to take place regularly and... safely," he cleared his throat. "If the river carries too much water, we simply dam it up—and we release additional water if it is too little for the boats."

"And this morning the water supply was full?"

Teddy Jennings nodded.

"Who can operate your system?"

"Anyone. It's a simple hand-operated crank. We haven't secured it. Who in this wilderness would—"

"The fact is that someone has tampered with the mechanism, Mr Jennings," Jupiter noted under the approving nod of those present. "Just after the third boat set off, this unknown person opened the sluice gate and drained the water in one go. I suggest we go and have a look."

"I suggest we go back to the hotel," the actor demanded. "I've had enough. First that strange night and now this." His comment met the mood of the other guests and Pat and Ken were instructed to set off to get the off-road vehicles.

In this tense situation, Mr Jennings stayed with the tour group. After a brief exchange of views between The Three Investigators, Jupiter volunteered to follow Pat and Ken.

After the trio had left, Mr Jennings distributed the packed lunches that had been left earlier on the lakeside on the way there. The guests gratefully bit into their sandwiches. They could well use a refreshment after this shock.

During the meal, speculations bubbled up. The 'poacher' was the word that was heard most often, although Mr Jennings was never tired of pointing out that he had never had any problems before.

After a while, Jack Donnelly turned up. His camera dangled in front of his stomach. He mingled with the crowd and had them tell him everything.

A few minutes later, Althena arrived. She winked at Bob, but then sat down with Corona to report.

Bob stayed with Pete and took care of his sprained ankle. It was swollen, but apparently nothing was broken.

In the meantime, the sandwiches had been eaten and the mood among those present became more irritable. More than an hour had passed and the two minibuses should have arrived by now, but there was no sign of Pat, Ken and Jupiter.

Even Mr Jennings couldn't explain all this. After another half hour had passed, Mr Jennings decided to organize a three-man search party. His idea met with more opposition than approval.

"What if the search party disappears?" shouted one of those present. "There's some danger lurking in the mountains!"

The Waterstones put their heads together and whispered. Bob picked up the word 'bewitched'.

"I think we should stay together," said Mr Stanley. "It is safer that way!"

Bob rose. He was worried about Jupe. It was time to do something, and he was getting tired of the discussions that was going on. "I volunteer to be in the search party," he shouted. "Althena, will you come with me?"

Althena nodded and stood up as well.

"All that's missing is a third person." Bob looked around searching. "Well? Who's with me?"

But he didn't need an answer, because Jupiter, Ken and Pat suddenly appeared some fifty metres away. The mix of annoyance and fear that had dominated the group just a few moments ago turned to relief. But to everyone's surprise, the three of them were on foot. Where were the minibuses?

The three did not respond to the curious shouts. Only when they had reached the group did Jupiter take the floor. "We're sorry to keep you waiting," he said. His voice trembled slightly. "But... someone has damaged the engines of the minibuses. We couldn't repair them."

## 11. The Noose is Tightening

The news about the disabled minibuses really scared the guests of Adventure Hotel.

“We’re trapped and someone’s trying to kill us!” John Fairbanks was the first one to speak, and his voice was pressed. “The noose is tightening!” Fairbanks pulled out his mobile phone which he hadn’t turned off, contrary to Maggie Jennings’s instructions. “I’m not gonna take this any more! I’m calling my agent and have him get me out of here in a helicopter.”

But apart from the fact that no connection was possible in this area, the mobile phone had not survived the bath in the lake. The actor put the phone away cursing. “I’ll call from the hotel,” he said. “I’m not staying another day here.” Some guests agreed with him.

Mr Jennings tried to calm the people down, but slowly he too had to face the fact that he was no longer in control of the situation. “We must prepare for a hike back.” He drew attention to the problem at hand. “When we get back to the hotel, I will of course immediately call the police to come here and investigate. Surely everything can be cleared up quickly and you can still spend a pleasant week here.”

“Let’s go!” The actor stood up. “There’s no time to lose.”

Teddy Jennings recommended taking only the bare essentials and leave the life jackets and helmets there. He would have the items picked up later. Then the group headed back under his guidance.

The Three Investigators kept a little distance from the others so that they could use the time to discuss the situation.

“Pat and Ken told me a lot,” Jupiter reported when they were alone. “I now know that Pat usually plays the Hooded Executioner. Mrs Jennings invented the character to frighten the guests. But last night, someone else used the disguise. Tonight, when the visit to the cave is on the programme, Pat will appear in the disguise. By the way, the cave is really an old Indian place. When it was discovered, it was even inspected by the state authorities. But since only inferior cultural treasures were found, it was quickly cleared for use by the hotel.”

“And the skeleton?” Pete asked.

“They may have found some bones, but Pat and Ken refused to comment on that.” Jupiter paused, as Jack Donnelly, who was walking ahead of them, dropped back to earshot. The Three Investigators sped up and passed him.

When they had enough distance again, Jupiter continued: “Anyway, we finally reached the minibuses. Mr Jennings had left the vehicles unlocked, which is not a bad thing in this area. But in doing so, he gave the perpetrator the opportunity to drive around in peace.”

“Excuse me?”

“Yes. One minibus was parked differently from before. The engine was still warm. It was only after he got back that the perpetrator disabled the vehicles.”

“How did he go about it?” Bob wanted to know. “Did he slash the tyres, drained the fuel?”

Jupiter shook his head. “No. It is not a question of blind destructiveness. He carefully removed a few important parts from the engines. Pat only noticed the sabotage when he tried to start the minibus. I’m afraid someone is going ahead exactly as planned.”

“Did you find a note? Any sign? A clue?” Pete asked.

“No, but I found something else!” Jupiter looked around and lowered his voice. “The bird. The mynah was there.”

“Blackeye?”

“Right. A little away from the minibuses, he was jumping around in the grass. When Pat and Ken were busy with the engines, I tried to catch him. I could see that his wings were clipped, but he got away from me! He can only fly a few metres, but that was enough.”

“Did Pat and Ken know about this?”

“No.”

“Are you sure it was Blackeye? I mean, a bird like that is quite common.”

“I saw the ring on his foot. And I tested him,” said Juve not without pride. “When we were out of earshot, I said to him: ‘I’m scared’. And he answered well: ‘Go or I’ll shoot you’. You remember? Those were the exact words the bird squawked when we arrived at the hotel!”

They had to interrupt their conversation again, as the group had reached the edge of the mountain, from which, to the relief of the hikers, a part of the hotel could be seen. But Mr Jennings dampened the prospect of a quick arrival.

“Of course we can’t climb down the rocks,” he explained. “That would be too dangerous. We have to take a detour. But you can see we’re getting closer to the hotel.”

Some of those present murmured. They were not used to walking and had aching feet. Above all, they wanted to be safe at last. The group started moving again. Only The Three Investigators stopped for a moment, as they stared down to the hotel.

They couldn’t see the person clearly at a distance, but it had to be Mrs Jennings who suddenly appeared in the hotel forecourt. In her hand, she was holding an elongated object that looked like a rifle. After looking around for a few seconds, she turned around and went back into the hotel.

“Strange,” Jupiter murmured. “I wonder what’s happening back there.”

Puzzled, they decided to walk on.

Bob changed the subject. “Juve, I’m afraid we can meanwhile bury your theory of the millionaire’s involvement in this. I can hardly imagine that Robert Woodbridge would risk the lives of the guests on today’s boat trip, just to put out a contest for two detective teams.”

Jupiter nodded thoughtfully. “Unless things have got out of hand.” But he realized that they would have to take a broader view of the case. “Maybe we should deal with the mystery first—I mean the verse that Althena found outside the door to the cave, which the disguised nocturnal visitor accidentally lost it or deliberately left it there.”

Jupiter had the paper with him. They stopped for a moment and bent over the paper. Although it had been soaked in the boat accident, the text was still visible.

“I assume that this verse refers to the cave,” Jupiter said. “In any case, they fit the story the Waterstones told us:”

*Three tests of the eagle for life or death;  
See the three rocks on which our dominion is built;  
You have power and strength;  
You have intelligence and courage;  
But do you also possess wisdom?  
Only then will you have the treasure to make you a chief.*

Bob looked up. “There’s no need to speak of a puzzle. I think the meaning of the text is pretty clear. It’s an instruction for action. It’s about a three-part test a person had to pass to

become a chief. I suppose that test had to be taken in the cave. Once we get in there, everything should become clear to us.”

Jupiter nodded. “But remember—this test is to the death!”

“I think it’s all quite nice,” Pete ironically interjected. “I just don’t see what this story has to do with the attack on our tour group. There is a dangerous maniac running around out here. That’s the bigger problem right now. But as you say, let’s crack the chief’s puzzle tonight and get the treasure, whatever it is. Anyway, the message fits us perfectly. The candidate must have intelligence, courage and wisdom. I am wise, Bob is intelligent and sportiness is your strength, Jupe.”

Jupiter smiled. “I think you are all mixed up, Pete. But it’s true, why shouldn’t we solve the mystery and make ourselves the best detectives at the same time?”

“And by the way, are we going to catch that crazy man?” Bob doubtfully looked ahead to the group. They had to keep going if they didn’t want to be left behind too far.

A little way ahead of them, the Waterstones struggled with a final climb before the trail finally made a bend and headed towards the hotel.

The opportunity was good. “Let’s ask those two old ladies,” Bob suggested. “I’m sure they haven’t told us everything yet!”

When they caught up with the Waterstones, however, The Three Investigators discovered that the women were quite out of breath and therefore not in the mood for conversation. At least they found out that the Waterstones’ knowledge was primarily based on a collection of newspaper clippings that they had left in their room.

“We’d be happy to show them to you,” Elizabeth Waterstone groaned and pointed with a shaky hand, “if only we can make it back to the hotel!”

The first hikers had already reached their destination. Out of consideration, The Three Investigators stayed with the Waterstone sisters. Pete was all right anyway, considering his aching ankle. Jupiter offered Cynthia to hook up with him and Bob did the same with Elizabeth.

When they entered the lobby of Adventure Hotel, the travel group had already gathered around Maggie and Teddy Jennings. The atmosphere seemed tense. John Fairbanks was speaking and The Three Investigators listened curiously.

“I demand that you let me use your phone,” Fairbanks declared in a firm voice. “I wish to leave immediately!”

“I’m afraid I cannot grant your wish,” Maggie Jennings replied coolly. “I’d be happy to show you to our office, Mr Fairbanks. However, it won’t help you... Our phone...” she paused briefly and seemed to be considering whether to continue. “Our phones were destroyed by someone. I’m sorry. But we are completely cut off from the outside world!”

## 12. The Archives of the Waterstones

When Maggie Jennings announced the news, panic broke out among those present. Maggie and her husband had their hands full trying to restore some calm in the lobby.

"If you all shout at once, it won't help us!" cried Mrs Jennings as loud as she could. "I understand your fear after your experience at the gorge. But you're safe here at the hotel!"

"You can say that," Fairbanks replied angrily. "How can you guarantee that when the lunatic actually broke into the hotel and destroy the equipment?"

"The hotel was not locked this afternoon," Mrs Jennings countered, "and I was in the kitchen cooking. I didn't know anything about the incident on your boat trip. But from now on, we'll be careful!"

"Oh, nonsense!" cried Fairbanks. "How about everybody gets a gun, and we shoot anything that moves!"

"John, you're not in one of your movies here," the actress stopped him. "Can't we go somewhere and get help? How far is it to that little train station we arrived at?"

"On foot, perhaps two or three hours," replied Mr Jennings. "But the next train doesn't arrive until tomorrow morning."

"Then we'll pack our bags and leave on the first available train," Fairbanks immediately said.

"Are you sure you want to venture out into the wilderness on foot?" It was Jack Donnelly who suddenly became involved in the discussion. "We're making far too good a target. In general, we shouldn't split up into groups. This maniac has committed an attack. Now he has systematically cut us off from the outside world. He's probably hoping for the same panicky reaction we're showing. I think it's safer if we all stay together. Mrs Jennings can send her two employees to the train. They'll call the police, and only then will we leave the hotel. In the meantime, I believe that we still have plenty of supplies. Is that right, Mrs Jennings?"

"Of course," Mrs Jennings replied. "Food is not a problem."

"Then I would suggest we do it that way," Jack Donnelly said.

There was a murmur that Mrs Jennings considered to be agreement.

The manager of the hotel then regained her composure and nodded to Ken and Pat. "You will leave for the station in the morning. For now, we will secure all the doors."

Then she turned to the guests. "I ask that you meet me in the dining room in one hour to discuss the situation peacefully. In the meantime, please consider whether we should continue with our evening programme as planned. We had planned to visit the Cave of Torture. It is probably better for all of us if you let our programme entertain you instead of sitting around and scaring each other."

The guests went to their rooms mumbling. The Three Investigators approached the Waterstones for a moment.

Elizabeth did not give the impression that she was surprised by the news. Glad with anticipation, she nudged her sister. "Whenever something unforeseen happens, people always blame it on a madman..."

"... But it's the spirit of Walt that's behind it all," Cynthia added. "Go figure it out!"



Jupiter shook his head. "Do you really think a ghost can drain the dam in broad daylight, and then disable vehicles and destroy phones?"

"Ghosts that appear punctually at midnight only exist in old ghost stories," Elizabeth explained to him. She lowered her voice. "The spirits we speak of are much more dangerous. You must remember that Walt, according to our firm suspicion, died in an old Indian cave. Such places are centres of paranormal power. If we disturb the tranquillity of the place of worship, all of nature turns against us. Remember, young man, curses and witchcraft do not stop at daylight."

Cynthia interrupted her. "Don't frighten the young man like that. Pete has gone quite pale again!"

"I'm fine," The Second Investigator hurried to say, but it did not sound convincing. Was the theory of the two ladies really to be dismissed? In any case, he didn't bet a cent on Jupiter's idea of detective competition. Then he decided to change the subject. "Could we now look at the newspaper clippings you spoke of?"

"Gladly. Please follow us to our room," Cynthia said.

The Waterstone sisters occupied the room 'Shelley'—named after Mary Shelley, and it was furnished in a dark Old English style to match its namesake.

Elizabeth Waterstone walked up to a drawer and took out a brown envelope. "Please be seated, young gentlemen." The Three Investigators took their seats on the heavy chairs.

There must have been over thirty newspaper articles that the Waterstones spread out before them. From the smallest report to the biggest, they had carefully cut out everything. Most of the articles were from the time when Walt Walker had disappeared.

With interest, Juve studied a photo of the student group, which had been taken at the camp in the mountains. The missing person had been identified by a thick white circle. On a closer look, there was an indefinable dark spot just above his right shoulder.

Overall, a review of the articles revealed few new aspects. Interestingly enough, there was no mention of an Indian treasure anywhere, only of the mythical cave, which the group, under the guidance of Professor Frederick Anderson, had not found. The reason for the search had been the discovery of an old document of a medicine man.

Walt Walker was described in several places as a lonely student who cared more for his pets than for his colleagues. But he was the best of Professor Anderson's students. Immediately after Walt's disappearance, rumours of a connection with Indian sorcery arose, which the official authorities vehemently denied.

When Elizabeth Waterstone noticed that Jupiter was pushing the articles away, she said: "We are convinced that Walt has found the cave... and he died in there! Tonight we will... we will see his skeleton!"

Jupiter looked at her for a moment and then asked: "Why exactly did you travel to this hotel, ladies? What is it that you wish to achieve here?"

Cynthia replied in a muffled voice, as if she feared someone was listening outside the door. "We want to make contact with Walt's spirit. We want to know what is troubling him... And if necessary, we will see to it that the cave, or even the entire hotel, is closed and his spirit is left alone."

Jupiter nodded thoughtfully, gathered the articles together and put them back in the envelope. "It's almost 6 pm, fellas. The guests are meeting in the dining room. We should use the time wisely. Thank you very much, dear ladies, and we'll see you in the cave later. But first, the three of us need to get one or two things straight."

When The Three Investigators were back in their room, Jupiter came straight to the point. "In 15 minutes, Mrs Jennings will be rounding up the guests. That means that we'll have a clear path to investigate the other suspects. I suggest we split up. One of us will attend the meeting so we don't miss anything." Pete's arm shot up immediately. Jupiter nodded and continued: "One of us will check Jack Donnelly's room in detail. I'd like to do that, and Bob, you take care of—"

"Yeah?" Bob threw in expectantly.

"—You take care of the poacher! Pat and Ken told me he lives in an old log cabin not far from here. I've had the route described to me."

"Okay. I will. But why do I get the most dangerous job?" Bob asked. "Even if the poacher is innocent, some other madman is jumping around out there, or even..." he said with an ambiguous side glance at Pete, "... the ghost of Walt just waiting to find a suitable victim! Perhaps the Waterstone sisters are right after all?"

"Someone has to do it and you handle danger very well," explained Jupiter. "And you certainly don't want to rummage around in Donnelly's room again."

Bob nodded. "It's all right. I'll be careful. Give me a little time."

"Then might I ask you for your lock picks, Pete?" said The First Investigator. "The door locks here are so simply constructed that I can manage without your helpful assistance."

Reluctantly Pete pulled the case out of his jacket. "And what do I tell the meeting if Mrs Jennings asks for you?"

"We need to rest from the boat ride. That should be convincing enough!"

### 13. The Poacher's Cabin

After Pete had left for Maggie Jennings's meeting, Jupiter and Bob waited until the voices of the other guests had died away in the corridor. Only then did both of them left the room and then went their separate ways.

It was no problem getting into Jack Donnelly's room. At the second attempt, the lock clicked and Jupiter pushed the door open. He began rummaging around the papers that lay on the desk. At first sight, they seemed uninteresting. Unfortunately, Donnelly had taken his wallet with him to the meeting. But he found a notebook on the table. Jupiter leafed through it and found, among other things, several names and phone numbers of Hollywood celebrities.

The First Investigator frowned and turned to the briefcase leaning against the wall next to the bed that was decorated with witches' heads. The contents there seemed to confirm Jupiter's thoughts. He put the briefcase aside and looked for the camera. Finally, he found it in the dresser.

It was a digital camera and Jupe turned it on. He clicked the photo playback button. On the small display, the latest photos taken appeared—those from the hike back to the hotel. He clicked further—there was a photo of him struggling in the water to get back on the boat... Click—it was Bob, who convulsively held on to the rope of the inflatable boat... Click—it was Mr Stanley, sliding out of the boat... Click—it was Fairbanks.

Jupiter took a deep breath and was about to click to the next photo when one of the screaming floor tiles that were installed in the corridor gave him a fright. Someone was out there and it seemed to be right outside Donnelly's room! But Jupiter was prepared for such a situation—as soon as he entered the room, he had already looked for ways to escape and hide. The camera was switched off with one flick of the wrist. He quickly let it slide back onto the dresser.

Jupiter had chosen the wardrobe as an emergency hiding place, which had a door with slats. Through it, he hoped, he could still observe parts of the room.

Quickly and more quietly than one would have expected from his stately body, he disappeared between Donnelly's shirts and suits and had closed the door from the inside. He tried to breathe as calmly and steadily as possible. The clothes hanging on the hangers smelled of Donnelly's eye-catching aftershave.

Then he heard a faint creak at the door, which then opened slowly.

Bob took his time. Thanks to Jupiter's exact description, it was easy to find the way to the poacher's cabin. But he did not want to be unpleasantly surprised. Again and again, he stopped at a suitable place to look at the surroundings for anything suspicious.

"Now I'd have to be an Indian," he thought to himself. "Reading tracks, understanding sounds, being silent, becoming invisible to others." But unfortunately he was just a normal boy from Rocky Beach, who could understand bus schedules and computer programs, but not the sounds of animals or the scents of the plants. The bird that flew up to the tree, was the noise an expression of the joy of a successful prey? Or had it been frightened by another animal... or a person?

The more Bob paid attention to his surroundings, the more he felt that he was being watched. The poacher knew what he was doing. He lived here. He knew every step of the way. He read nature. At a hundred metres, he could hear the branch breaking that Bob just stepped on. And he waited patiently for a mistake.

Bob paused and looked around. The forest had become denser and darker. Between the trunks, branches, twigs and leaves, the footpath was barely visible. Somewhere back there must be a clearing where the cabin was.

Bob tried to calm down. The poacher was not at the top of his suspect list—Jack Donnelly was, at least as far as Bob was concerned... but he wasn't sure. Bob cautiously crept on.

And then he saw a green glow, he knew that the clearing and the log cabin was close by. Bob had followed the path around a small hill, and suddenly the view was clear. Almost automatically, he stopped and took a closer look at the log cabin. At this point, the path was wider.

Bob could see that the cabin that was deteriorating. A pile of logs was waiting to be used. At the side of the cabin, the poacher had stacked cages of various sizes. No smoke rose from the chimney... no movement was visible... nothing happened.

Except for a quiet crack—right above him. Then a hiss, followed by a sharp breeze. Bob threw his head up, but it was already too late. A huge cage crashed down on him, brushed his shoulder and then threw him to the ground. Bob was trapped!

Fortunately, it didn't take him long to recover from the shock. Bob immediately crawled to the edge of the cage and managed to lift it. But as he stretched his arm underneath the gap that had opened up, a large tattered leather shoe pressed against his wrist. Bob looked up in horror. He looked straight into a pair of angry sparkling eyes, which he could just about make out through a tangle of hair. It was the poacher!

"Well, well, well," the man said. "What a handsome catch!"

"I... I..." Bob stuttered.

Without paying attention to Bob's stammering, the man pulled him out from under the cage with a powerful jerk. He skilfully tied Bob's hands. With the help of a rope, he brought the cage back into its old position under the branches. Then the man pushed Bob forward. He didn't say another word.

Bob stumbled along the path, angry at himself. A great Indian he was. Like a fool, he had stepped into the cleverly set trap and taken by surprise. Now there was probably no doubt that he had fallen into the hands of a madman.

What was the man going to do with him? What about the other guests of the hotel? Above all, who could stop him? Pete was at the meeting; Jupiter was checking out Donnelly; and Bob was trapped. How much time was left?

The poacher led him to the cabin, but instead of going inside, he pushed Bob around it. At the back, there was a storeroom, which was simply but effectively secured by a bolt latch. No sooner had they arrived than loud yells rose from inside.

"Hey! We want out!" There were two desperate-sounding voices yelling out—one male, one female.

"Shut up!" The poacher pushed the bolt aside, opened the door and gave Bob a shove into the storeroom. It happened so fast that the door was closed again before Bob knew it. A few firm arms caught hold of him.

"Bob?" It was Pat, the hotel's employee.

And who was the woman? "Hello, fellow detective..." It was Althena.

The prison was narrow and windowless. The little light that fell through the gaps between the thick wooden boards allowed Bob to only see dimly where he had landed. The room was used by the poacher as a storeroom for all kinds of equipment. As Bob's eyes got better used to the darkness, he could make out fishing tackle and various wooden tools.

"Where will it end?" Pat muttered while Bob's eyes were still wandering. "Hok'ee is like a changed man. He's really fanatical. I've never seen him like that before."

"Hok'ee?" Bob asked. "Is that the poacher's name?"

"Yes. Hok'ee. I, um... I'm the only one from the hotel who has contact with him. Mrs Jennings does not trust him. She's afraid he might frighten the hotel guests. She only appreciates the horror that she stages herself. Ken is on her side. But Hok'ee is all right—at least, I always thought he was. We used to fish together up at the river. Now that the dam incident had happened during the boat trip, I wanted to confront him. In fact, I didn't believe that he was behind it."

"So instead of putting you in his best fishing spot, he has you under lock and key," Althina said. "Then he ambushed me and captured Bob."

Pat nodded. After a short break he continued in a depressed voice: "He has always been interested only in the Cave of Torture. I told him about the excavations and about my performance which is coming up tonight. That's bad enough. But the worst thing is Hok'ee searched me earlier and took the keys to the hotel and the cave's entrance. And the Hooded Executioner costume I am to perform in is in his hands as well!"

## 14. The Cave of Torture

Jupiter pushed the clothes a little to one side to be able to see through the slats of the wardrobe better. The door to Jack Donnelly's room was now open wide enough for someone to pass through. But still no one entered. Jupiter held his breath.

At the edge of the door, the fingers of a right hand appeared, followed a little higher by a dark blond mop of hair and critically curious eyes. It was Corona!

Jupiter relaxed and could not avoid a grin. The girls apparently pursued the same plan as The Three Investigators.

Jupiter wondered whether he should tell Corona that he was here as well. Like himself, she hurriedly made her way across the desk, had recognized the insignificance of the papers there in a matter of seconds, turned to the dresser and took out the camera.

Now Jupe could no longer hold himself back. In a disguised voice, he hissed: "Put it back!"

The effect was impressive. In shock, the camera slipped out of the girl's hand and landed rudely on the dresser. Corona looked around in panic.

"I am the hotel ghost," murmured Jupiter. "I see everything. And I can't stand people snooping around!"

"What... what is this?" Astonishingly quickly, Corona regained her composure. "Is there a camera here or something?"

"No camera... I am a ghost... I don't need cameras!" With these words Jupiter fell out of the closet.

In shock, Corona tipped backwards, leaning against the dresser and it took a few seconds before she realized that no one else but Jupiter had played this evil joke on her.

"My goodness," she said, still breathing heavily. "That's the kind of humour from Alfred Hitchcock!"

Jupiter covered his touch of guilty conscience by appearing to be cool and calm. "Sorry, but I don't get this kind of opportunity very often," he apologized and to change the subject, he quickly added: "Are we detective teams still competing?"

"I do not know that anyone has announced the end."

"Perhaps now is the time. After searching Donnelly's room, I'm pretty sure there's a whole other story going on here."

Corona took her hand off the dresser. "Well, then I can save myself the trouble of looking. All right, then. Anyway, things have got worse since what happened this afternoon. It's a threat to everyone here. Shall we call it a draw?"

At that moment, they heard the creaking sound of the dining room door opening. A babble of voices reached them.

"Apparently, the meeting is over," said Jupiter. "Time to leave."

Just in time, they reached the lobby, where they could mingle with the people unnoticed. After a few moments, Pete pushed his way to them and reported first of all that Donnelly had instigated a long discussion about possible opponents of the hotel.

After some back and forth, Mrs Jennings had come out with the fact that she had given up another hotel to open Adventure Hotel. Several employees had been laid off. Only Pat and

Ken had remained with them. Donnelly clearly saw a motive here.

When the discussion ended, the guests had finally decided to enjoy themselves in the Cave of Torture despite the threat. After all, the whole stay had been paid for. With the assurance that her husband would keep an eye on the surroundings and the secret tip to pack a bathing suit, Mrs Jennings had, according to Pete, asked the guests to gather in the lobby in an hour.

Just one hour later, everyone gathered again—the two Waterstone sisters, all excited and with Mr Stanley in tow; Fairbanks accompanied by his girlfriend, and even Jack Donnelly, who, as Bob had found out, was in reality called Hank Wheeler.

Bob and Althena had not yet returned. “First we’ll have a look at the cave,” Jupiter said. “If they’re not back in half an hour, we’ll have to go on a little trip to look for them no matter what happens.”

Pete nodded resignedly.

Mrs Jennings clapped her hands and tried to spread good cheer. She asked the guests to gather in front of the black curtain, behind which was the entrance to the Cave of Torture.

When everyone had crowded around her, she gave a short introduction about how she and her husband had found the cave and restored it. But in view of the recent unplanned events, she wanted to do without most of the built-in surprises for this excursion.

Suddenly something dark fluttered over the heads of the guests. Even Mrs Jennings flinched. Apparently, this was not on her programme.

It was Blackeye! He flew in and sat at his favourite spot on the wooden pole as if he had never been away.

Mrs Jennings interrupted her speech and pointed at the bird. “Blackeye’s back!”

“I’m scared,” Blackeye announced. “Go or I’ll shoot you!”

“What luck! I thought a cat had caught you,” Pete rejoiced. But Jupiter became very thoughtful, so thoughtful that Pete was worried about Jupiter’s lower lip, which his friend pinched intensely.

Meanwhile, Mrs Jennings had continued her talk and pulled out a key from her cape to open the heavy steel door. “We’ll go in now!”

Pete and Corona pushed forward to see better. But they felt someone pulling them back. It was Jupiter. His thoughtfulness had changed into excitement.

“Bob and Althena are in danger!” he whispered so that those around him could not hear. “I’m sure of it! Pete and Corona, get to the log cabin at once! Hopefully it is not too late!”

“Why?” Pete asked, stunned.

“I can’t explain everything now. Anyway, it’s more than a feeling. I... go ahead, trust me.”

“And what about you?” Corona asked.

“I’ll stay here and check on things. I’m afraid something else might happen. Hurry up!”

Even though he wanted to see the inside of the cave, Pete did not protest for long. He took the still hesitant Corona by the arm and pushed her out of the crowd of guests. Jupiter followed to let them out through a window since the main entrance was locked. No one noticed anything.

When he returned, Jupiter just about joined the last guests who passed through the open door with unsteady steps. A dull musty smell greeted him.

Jupiter was overcome by the thought that he had exaggerated in his first reaction. At least for the guests in the hotel, there was not necessarily a danger. Doors and windows were

closed and moreover, Teddy Jennings was keeping watch. Had Jupiter drawn the right conclusions? A few more clues couldn't hurt. The First Investigator was sure that he would get it soon.

There was a terrible stench in the cave and when the door was closed, everyone stood completely in the dark. A scattered cough broke the silence. Suddenly, there was a draft and the air was slowly getting better. Something splashed.

Fairbanks rumbled off: "Now turn on the lights, Mrs Jennings. We are no longer in the mood for a joke!"

As if the manager of the hotel had listened to him, something smouldered somewhere on the ceiling. Slowly it became brighter and you could see that it was a kind of chandelier, which was suspended from the cave ceiling by a rope stretched from the walls. But it was not an ordinary chandelier. When its outlines became more clearly visible, a horrified murmur was heard. Jupiter could clearly hear Cynthia Waterstone mutter the name 'Walt Walker' with a combination of fright and pride about the accuracy of her suspicion.

The countless small lamps were not hanging from an elegantly decorated gold frame. Instead, they were playing around a human skeleton, which became more and more scary between the many lights.

"You can figure out what happened here," whispered Elizabeth. "Walt should deserve a better ending, shouldn't he, Mr Stanley?"

"Absolutely, ladies. No wonder his spirit wanders. I'm beginning to believe it myself." Stanley, too, stared at the bones hovering greenish yellow above them. Two of the ribs were broken. Walt's death must have been horrible.

Jack Donnelly had something in his hand and Jupiter realized that it was his camera. Apparently, he even wanted to take a photo here in the cave.

It was now becoming brighter and brighter and The First Investigator was amazed at the impressive sight offered. They found themselves in a cavern that tapered upwards to a point about eight metres high. There were two boulders, each about five metres high and flattened at the top. They were positioned about two-and-a-half metres apart, and one could walk between them. In front of the boulders, where they were standing, Mrs Jennings had created a kind of dance floor.

Further into the cavern, they came to a small pool decorated with bones and grimaces, in which black glistening water splashed. It was the eeriest pool Jupiter had ever seen.

Jupiter went back to the boulders. He sensed that they should hold the solution to the cave mystery—the truth of which Jupiter was more convinced than ever. No doubt, this was the cave that the students had been looking for. But the verse Corona had found spoke of 'three rocks'...

The group had meanwhile gathered around the boulder on the left-hand side, on whose wall were sketch-like drawings. Mrs Jennings told them how they had come across the drawings during the cleaning work.

Jupiter curiously approached the drawings, which were made with just a few strokes. He saw several stick figures carrying bows and arrows. One of the figures climbed a mountain. Another jumped from there to a second, somewhat smaller mountain, on which something was painted that looked like a shiny dog's face. The third figure ran towards a group of other figures. He wore feathers on his head and looked more like an eagle than a human. Animals were drawn above it—a bear, an owl, and an eagle.

Jupiter Jones was so absorbed in the sight that he did not notice what was happening behind his back.



## 15. Who is the Hooded Executioner?

When suddenly someone cried out, all the heads of the guests immediately turned around, full of fear that something might have happened again.

Two red eyes stared down from a recess in the cave wall located some two metres above the ground. The eyes slowly moved back and forth, and a deep voice hissed: “The Hooded Executioner has returned. You will all regret that you have come... especially for... one of you!”

A dark figure emerged from the shadows and several of those present squealed in fear. From the Waterstones, Jupiter thought he heard something like a joyful expectation.

Maggie Jennings took command and, in a few words, scared away the fears of the people, but also the hopes of the Waterstones, by saying: “I promised not to scare you again tonight, so we’ll do without all other surprises today, then no more misfortune shall befall us. So I will tell you the following secret. The red eyes are battery operated light bulbs. You are looking at the mask of the Hooded Executioner, behind which is no one else but Pat, my assistant. We’re going to skip all the scary stuff and go straight to the last event. The Hooded Executioner is going to play music for us. Ladies and gentlemen, dancing is the event of the evening!”

After a short break, she added: “I’m surprised though that you are performing tonight, Pat. It was supposed to be for later. Well, I guess we’re all a little shaken up today.”

The figure in the black cloak murmured something that was not understandable.

“While Pat is getting the music ready,” Mrs Jennings continued, “I can tell you all quickly that you can take a dip in the pond at the back of the cave. The water is pleasantly warm. Have a good time! And have fun at the—Ghost Dance!”

Mrs Jennings disappeared into a passageway next to the entrance. A few seconds later, she appeared next to the Hooded Executioner who, as they could see now, was standing on a gallery that had been constructed into the cave wall. Mrs Jennings seemed to be showing him something, and then she went back to mingle with the guests again.

The first song came out, loud and tinny—a past hit, bizarrely alienated with ghostly screams and all sorts of weird noises. In the meantime, the air jets had almost completely banished the musty smell and the first people began to dance.

Under normal circumstances, Jupiter would have enjoyed the scenery very much. He was not a fan of discotheques, but there was something fascinating about this presentation of music. Still, he couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong. So he began to take a closer look at those present.

Just a short distance away, in front of the wall drawings, the Waterstones were arguing with Mr Stanley. Jupiter could guess what it was all about—Stanley doubted the existence of Walt’s spirit and the Waterstones vividly defended it.

Then there was Donnelly, who showed Susan Dice something. His eyes moved on and he couldn’t help smiling. Hayley Montgomery had stripped down to a bathing suit and jumped into the pool, cheering. Others danced. There was no doubt that Mrs Jennings had made it! The mood was saved. Jupiter thought about how easy it would be to achieve this.

Now, a cleverly-concealed fog machine emitted a dense vapour onto the dance floor, which caused some irritation for a moment. Then the crowd danced all the more enthusiastically. People were enjoying themselves. Jupiter looked at the Hooded Executioner. So Pat was behind it. But he wondered who was behind the Hooded Executioner mask when Bob and Althena confronted him last night? Then Jupiter thought of the two of them. Perhaps it was better to leave the party and join up with Pete and Corona to look for them.

Mr Jennings was keeping a watch at one side. Ken was at the door and Pat was up on the gallery churning out music, so what was going to happen? He smelled it. Jupiter possessed a fine nose. Very slowly he sucked in the air. No, there was no doubt about it—the musty smell became stronger again as if the air jets had changed their direction. Could that have been intentional?

Jupiter looked up to the gallery, but the Hooded Executioner was not there anymore. Now even the first dancers felt the change in air and coughed. A couple was already pushing themselves out of the circle and wanted to leave the cave. But Ken fiddled with the door. He couldn't get it to open. Jupiter drove a shiver down his spine. He wasn't wrong—the crazy man had to be somewhere in there with them!

The stench was getting stronger. It had to be some kind of chemical stuff. Jupiter pulled out his handkerchief and held it to his nose. The couple, who had realized that the entrance was locked, made a big fuss. The stench stung their noses. More guests wanted to get out of the cave. Panic broke out at the door and several people started banging on it. Ken had to fight with the guests as he attempted to open the door. Maggie Jennings struggled in vain to find some peace.

The Waterstones, with Mr Stanley in tow, were the only people besides Jupiter who hadn't thrown themselves into the crowd. Cynthia had stuffed a few tissues into her ears against the ever louder music, and held a handkerchief over her nose and mouth. The sisters saw that Jupiter was still in his place and started to move. Now their faces suddenly looked very pale. When they had almost reached the detective, Jupiter saw the Hooded Executioner. He had hidden himself behind the music equipment. That wasn't Pat! Why hadn't Jupiter figured that out straight away? Now the Executioner was tampering with something that was attached to the wall. It was a rope... and the rope ran...

Jupiter reacted with lightning speed. The two ladies took a step towards him. At the same moment, Jupiter noticed a movement above him and threw himself with all his strength on Cynthia Waterstone. Both landed hard on the ground at the same time as something crashed beside them!

Jupiter had just managed to slip his arm under Cynthia's head so that she did not hit too hard on the dance floor. She moaned and remained lying close to him. Splinters of glass flew through the air, mixed with a rain of larger and smaller fragments. It was the chandelier. Suddenly, it was dark.

The horrified glances could only attach themselves to the lighting of the music system—and to the reddish eyes of the Hooded Executioner. The music continued to boom for a few more moments, then it stopped as well. The deadly silence that followed was all the more oppressive.

"Are you all right, Miss Waterstone?" Jupiter asked and pulled his arm out from under her head and helped her to sit up. "We should get out of here!"

She groaned and answered in a shaky voice: "It's all right, Jupiter. I thank you. You are a true gentleman!"

"It's not over yet." Jupiter helped her up in a hurry. "The Hooded Executioner... is coming to us." He took her by the arm, Elizabeth hooked in from the other side and they took

a few steps towards the still closed exit. Broken glass crunched beneath them.

“It feels like standing on Walt’s bones,” Cynthia muttered and coughed. It stank viciously. Meanwhile, the Executioner’s red eyes floated above the dance floor. After a brief moment of silence, the banging at the door started again all the more violently.

“Now I’m coming for you,” it came out of the dark. The Hooded Executioner had made his way down to the ground. Jupiter’s blood throbbed in his veins. What should he do? Just when he had decided to throw himself on the Hooded Executioner in a surprise attack, Ken successfully opened the door. At the same moment, flashlights shone in from the outside.

“My goodness, what happened?” they heard Pat’s voice.

“Jupe!” That was Bob.

“Eww! It stinks in here!” That was Pete.

The helpers arrived just in time. Within seconds, the guests had fled out. A wall light came on. Mrs Jennings had turned them on from the gallery. Jupiter spun around. Now he was facing him—the Hooded Executioner.

The First Investigator took a step and threw himself with all his weight on the dark apparition. His opponent was bigger and stronger, but with a skilful hand movement, Jupiter managed to wrest the mask from him.

Pete, Bob, Corona, Althena and Pat came to his aid. They clung to the Hooded Executioner’s arms and legs and stared at his face. A tangle of hair and two sparkling eyes—as Jupiter had suspected, it was none other than... the poacher!

Hok’ee uttered a few obscure curses.

Mrs Jennings had watched the whole thing from the gallery. “You rascal!” she shouted. “I always knew you had something against my hotel here! But now it’s over, you crazy hermit! Now you’re going to jail!”

Pat and Ken tied up the man and took him away.

## 16. A Leap Over the Abyss

After the poacher had been led away, the guests slowly left the cave. Mrs Jennings was the last to come down from the gallery.

“And you detectives,” she asked, “don’t you want to go out?”

“We would like to take a look at the cave in peace,” replied Jupiter.

“Despite the stench?”

“It would be a lie if I said it didn’t bother us,” Jupiter said. “But since we are here, and now that peace has come...”

“Very well,” Mrs Jennings agreed. “I have adjusted the ventilation. But it will take a while before the air is clear again.”

“You’re using some kind of chemicals to remove the smell of mildew?” Jupe asked.

“A very simple composition—found in a chemistry experiment kit.” She turned towards the exit. “I have to check on the guests,” she said. “Shut the door, please—for security reasons, and because of the smell.”

Jupiter accompanied her to the steel door and let her out. Then he examined the door to see what happened earlier. The poacher had apparently pushed forward the bolts that were attached at the top and bottom at an opportunistic moment. Ken hadn’t noticed it at first, which had led to panic at the door. The First Investigator pushed the bolts back in so that the cave was locked from the inside. With what they were about to do, he didn’t want to be disturbed. He saw Pete’s questioning look, but Corona already gave the answer.

“Let’s deal with the Indian’s verse,” she said.

“And is that really Walt?” Pete asked and pointed to the skeleton.

Bob also had another problem. “If Hok’ee wanted to sabotage the hotel, why has he only started now?”

Jupiter pulled the piece of paper with the verse out of his pocket. “We’ll have time to explain later. Let’s solve this one first. Now we have the rare chance to explore the cave alone.”

“We have the rare chance to poison ourselves here as well,” Pete muttered and coughed violently. For better or worse, he realized that a little burning in his nose and throat was no obstacle to solving a little mystery—especially not for Jupiter Jones.

The wall lighting bathed the cave in a faint yellowish light and cast dark shadows on the walls. But it was bright enough that Jupiter could read the text again:

*Three tests of the eagle for life or death;  
See the three rocks on which our dominion is built;  
You have power and strength;  
You have intelligence and courage;  
But do you also possess wisdom?  
Only then will you have the treasure to make you a chief.*

“Let us remember,” Jupiter said. “it’s about a test for a future chief. He needs courage and strength, intelligence and wisdom.”

“And there’s the bear, the owl, and the eagle,” said Corona, pointing to the wall drawings.

Jupiter joined in. “With the verse, the drawing is relatively easy to interpret. The Indian must pass the tests—first climbing the rock, then jumping over to the other one, and finally a treasure reveals itself to him and he returns to his people with an eagle’s head, as a chief.”

“But in the verse there’s talk of three tests and three rocks!” Bob reminded.

“Hmm...” Jupiter thought aloud. “I still assume that the treasure was not found when the cave was restored. It was known only to a few insiders. Not even the newspapers reported on it, not to mention the Waterstone sisters, who comment on everything under the sun. The mere fact that someone tried to break into the cave last night and lost this note was enough to put us on the trail.”

“Do you think that last night the poacher dressed up as the executioner?” Bob asked. “Perhaps he learned of the existence of the Indian treasure and that is why he suddenly reacted so dangerously. He wants to get the treasure himself. You have also noticed that he stalks through the wilderness like half an Indian. He may have got a tip from his people.”

“Then why the fake break-in from the outside?” Corona asked. “And how does this fit in with the deactivated alarm system? The burglar must have been in the hotel... Maybe one has nothing to do with the other.”

Jupiter had long been elsewhere in his thoughts and took a searching look at the wall drawings. “I suggest that we just try it out. Hopefully the five of us will be able to meet the demands of an Indian chief. The first task is to climb the boulder! Volunteers, step forward.”

Inconspicuously, Pete took a step back into the darker part of the cave.

“Pete,” Jupe continued unmoved. “Strength and power—that’s something for the most athletic among us. Where are you?”

“I have... an ankle injury. I was gonna say, yeah, sure, the most athletic one, but... I am, well... if you all think so...”

“Yes,” said Jupiter, Corona, Bob and Althena as if from one mouth.

“That’s what we mean,” Jupe added.

Pete gave up. “Okay, I’ll try!”

He examined the five-metre-high boulder from all sides, trying to look as professional as possible. Finally, he decided on the side where the left boulder and the wall met. Pete found a good grip and began to climb up slowly. Ignoring the unhelpful shouts from below, he actually managed to come to a halt after a few minutes.

“Here is something like a platform here,” he shouted down, not without pride in his achievement so far. “I can see an even bigger platform on the second boulder... and on the wall over there is a small recess—something like an altar, but you won’t be able to see it from below.”

“Okay,” cried Jupiter. “Now jump over!”

“Excuse me?”

“Jump over to the second boulder! That’s the task!”

“Can someone else take over? Jupe, that’s way over two metres! I can’t do it without a run-up! No, Jupe, I can do the climb, but this is something else...”

“Then please explain to me who else should jump?” cried Jupiter. “After all, we’re all standing down here!”

“How about you climb up to me, Jupe,” Pete said. “It’s really nice up here. The air is much better too. And the view...”

Jupiter shook his head. “We can’t go on like this,” he said angrily.

“Hold on, hold on,” said Pete from above. “If someone needs to get to the platform on that second boulder, I have another suggestion. There are steps leading up there. From here, I can see them clearly, but you may have to look for them.”

Jupiter was the first to see the steps and before the others could say anything, he had already set foot on the second boulder and was looking for support with his hands stretching up. Slowly but surely, Jupe made his way up and finally he reached next to the altar-like recess.

The small group at ground level marvelled at two detectives who stood like monuments on the five-metre-high columns but they hardly dared to move in view of the height.

Jupiter examined the recess more closely. It consisted of a small windowsill-like surface, to which a flat stone was vertically attached. He pulled out his pocket knife and searched for cracks, which he soon uncovered. No doubt, it was some kind of secret compartment, behind which a treasure was possibly hidden. This was symbolized by the drawing of the shining dog face. But how could the opening mechanism be activated? Jupiter felt and tapped everywhere without result.

“You must jump over, Pete,” Corona said into the tense silence. “It’s the only way to trigger the opening mechanism.”

“What will it change if Pete jumps over to me here?” Jupiter wondered.

“I don’t know. But that’s the test,” Corona said. “If Pete doesn’t dare, we’ll never get anywhere! I believe that that’s the test of courage, Pete. That’s an attribute to be a chief.”

“I don’t want to be a chief!” Pete shouted back in indignation.

To Pete’s horror, Jupiter agreed with Corona. “Let’s give it a try. Why not?” He said as he crawled back to the steps and climbed down far enough to give Pete a clear path.

Pete looked down. The abyss was really deep and the distance to jump was about two-and-a-half metres. Corona, Althena, Bob and Jupiter looked at him expectantly. If he had a run-up, that would not be a problem at all. But this was a one-step attempt, not more. With his athleticism, he knew he could easily manage two metres fifty—at least when he’s on the beach. What could be different here? The abyss? Ridiculous. Just ignore it... Pete set himself in a squatting position. He focussed... He focussed on the target.

And with one massive push from his legs... Pete jumped!

When his hands reached the other boulder, Pete felt something fall away from under his feet. He had not expected this. Pete landed on his stomach, but his feet lost their hold and he slid downwards very slowly. He desperately clamped his hands down to search for a better grip. Both of his hands finally found protruding handholds on the boulder, which were somehow located to the side. He hung there with his upper body just barely on the rocky plateau, and his legs dangling over the abyss. Trembling, he slowly pulled himself up with all his strength.

Bob, who had positioned himself just below Pete to protect him if necessary, groaned in relief. Suddenly, there was a rumbling sound coming from the recess.

“Wow!” cried Jupiter. “It worked! The opening mechanism is activated!”

There was no stopping now. In the order in which they were standing, all the detectives quickly climbed up the second boulder.

Meanwhile, Jupiter expertly explained that Pete’s hard impact had pressed down on a stone slab and that had activated the mechanism. But the others were already climbing up. There wasn’t enough space to stand, but everyone could peer into the recess that had opened up. What they saw took their breath away.

They looked into a cavity. So here it stood, the third rock that the verse mentioned. Its shape was similar to that of the two big boulders, only that it was much smaller. The top was

also flattened, and on this surface lay a mask depicting a wild dog with a wicked grimace. They could see that it was made of fine gold.

The Three Investigators and Callidae took a breath. The mask had to be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, if not more. It completely captivated them despite the gruesome image.

Pete wanted to reach into the hole and touch the mask, but Althena held him back. “Pete, leave it. We are not meant to take the mask.”

“How true!” A cold, sharp voice came up to them unexpectedly from the ground below. In shock, the detectives almost slipped down the boulder. They looked down and saw someone coming out from the shadows.

## 17. The Final Test

The man held a gun in his hand, which he had pointed at the detectives. He was wearing the terribly unfashionable green sweater which he apparently never wanted to take off.

"How true, how true," he repeated. "For it is for me to take the mask. And I thank you for the good preparatory work. Alone, I would never have been able to activate the opening."

"Mr Stanley," Pete stuttered. "Where did you come from all of a sudden?"

"I was hiding," Stanley said boldly.

"Stanley is unfortunately not his name," Jupiter confidently added. "Let me present to you all—the anthropologist and leader of the student field trip at the time, Professor Frederick Anderson!"

Jupiter took a dramatic pause for effect and then continued: "You have been after the mask for years, and have never quite given up. When you heard about the opening of the cave, you reacted immediately and checked into this hotel under the name of 'Stanley'."

"If I had a hat, I'd take it off to you," Anderson said. "But even though you've guessed my true identity, the gold mask will still make my retirement sweet. I've already prepared my retreat abroad perfectly."

"Isn't the pension as a professor enough for a nice retirement?" Jupiter asked somewhat underhandedly.

"I was never a full professor," Anderson replied. "I have not had that honour. Now get off the boulder!"

"Why so fast?" Jupiter asked. "We are among ourselves, and we have time. Let's have a little chat about what I have guessed—or should I say... 'logically deduced'! It was none other than you, who last night wore the mask of the Hooded Executioner and tried to enter the cave before you were surprised by Bob and Althena!"

Anderson nodded. "On that occasion, I unfortunately lost my paper on which I had written down the verse. Fortunately for me, as it turns out now, otherwise you wouldn't have been able to solve it for me." He giggled. "You nearly caught me in the computer room. I was studying the cave's layout on the computer. I was quite startled when an unexpected visitor came in."

"Especially since you thought that everyone else was sound asleep," added Jupiter. "If I remember correctly, it was you who first dished out the soup at dinner. After that, you put the sleeping pill into the pot. That was how you caught most of us."

Corona touched her forehead. "The simplest explanations are often the best."

"If you're such a bright boy," said the professor, "then you should also realize that you could slowly hand over the mask to me!"

"I haven't finished yet!" Jupiter couldn't stand it if he couldn't shed light on all aspects of the story, so he continued unmoved: "You faked a break-in in order to lay the trail outside. On the way here, we all saw the poacher. So you wanted to divert our attention to him."

"Surely I was not wrong about the poacher's malicious intentions as it turned out. Well, we've talked enough. Now give me the mask. You stay up there until I leave the cave."

"How did Walt die back then?" Jupiter asked bluntly. "After all, his pet bird, Blackeye, survived, who to your horror, recognized you when we checked in at the hotel. That



frightened you so much that you released him the very first thing that night!”

Jupiter had hit the mark. His question completely upset Anderson.

“Shut up!” he shouted. “I’ll kill you first, fat boy!”

“I’ve had enough!” Pete whispered to Jupiter in a shaky voice. “I admit I’m scared! Give him the thing and tell him to go away.”

Jupiter nodded. He had risked a shot in the dark and won. Now everything was clear to him. “Okay, Professor Anderson,” he said out loud. “You can take the mask yourself! We are not your servants! Let all of us get down now.”

Together they climbed back down to the bottom of the cave. Then they took a step aside and let Anderson pass.

Since he did not take his gun out of his hand and kept turning back to the detectives, it took a while until Anderson reached the platform. There he straightened up and stared fascinated into the cavity. He had probably not imagined the mask to be that big.

Jupiter threw an appraising glance at the steel door. But if they tried to run there and pull the bolts back, Anderson would have shot at them, as fanatical as he was. They watched as the professor carefully stuck his trembling hand into the opening.

Jupe feverishly pondered how he could stop Anderson. Next to him, Bob suddenly became restless.

“Professor! Stop!” Bob cried so loudly that it echoed off the walls of the cave. Anderson’s hand flinched back.

“Wait!” Bob took a step forward. Althena had said something earlier that had given him an idea—a connection that could not only serve to stop Anderson, but something greater—something that could affect them all—affect and above all, punish. What did the verse say? ‘Three tests for life or death’!

Bob saw that Anderson turned to look at him, so he continued: “The smaller rock in the opening points to the Indian’s third test, Professor... wisdom—if I remember correctly.” Bob paused a little while. “I don’t think the future chief should just take the mask. Wealth is not everything.”

“You may be right,” said Anderson quietly, but his voice took another turn. “Only I’m neither an Indian nor do I want to be a chief, and wealth is by no means everything, but it’s still something!”

“The test must have been to leave the mask in its place,” Bob said, under the appreciative looks of the others. “Perhaps there is a curse on it. The mask doesn’t look very friendly. Who knows what will happen if you—”

“It’s a coyote’s face,” cried Anderson. He sounded rushed. “And I’m not afraid of curses!” With that, he reached into the opening, grasped the mask and tried to pull it out. He felt that the mask budge a bit, but he couldn’t lift it out. “Somehow, it’s stuck. I can’t move it.” He then used both his hands, but still failed.

At the same moment, they could hear something rumbling. It sounded like an underground mechanism being set in motion.

Anderson stared down in horror. “I hear something... something is moving...” he stammered and involuntarily pulled his arms out of the opening, and retreated his body a bit.

That saved his life. About a metre above the opening was a hole as thick as a tree trunk. A powerful jet of water shot out, roared just past Anderson, and hit the detectives five metres below. Anderson had triggered the water jet by pulling the mask. At the same time, the opening to the mask slowly closed. As Althena and Bob had deduced, the mask was not to be taken—wealth is not everything.

In a flash, a layer of water had formed at the ground. Jupiter got up and tried to get to the exit. The cave was a deadly trap!

The door was lower than the dance floor, and a considerable amount of water had already accumulated in front of it. The water wasn't cold and it probably came from the lake.

Jupiter reached the door, knelt in the water and tried to loosen the heavy bolt. It was stuck. Desperately, he called his friends to help. But they came too late. The water was already too high. The pressure that the water exerted on the inward-opening door prevented it from opening.

Corona cried out in despair: "We have to keep our heads above the water!"

"The water level is rising fast! Where do we flee to when we reach the ceiling?" That was Pete. He said what they were all wondering, but no one answered him.

A few anxious moments later, the water was literally up to their necks. Now it was time to tread water to stay afloat. The water level rose incessantly. When it reached the height of the gallery, there was a short circuit and the cave became dark. Luckily they hadn't been electrocuted.

A light flashed on the rock. Professor Anderson, who was still standing up on the second boulder, had taken out a flashlight. Even through with the infernal roar, they could hear him yelling to be rescued.

It wasn't long before the water level had risen to Anderson and he began to struggle to stay afloat. Somehow he managed to hold the flashlight up. The ceiling came closer and closer. It was still about three metres and the water level rose faster as the cave narrowed towards the top.

"I warned you, Professor!" Bob shouted. "I could strangle you—if it wasn't so pointless! We're all going to drown anyway!"

"I don't want to!" whined Pete in a thin voice. "I wish I could conjure an exit!"

"There is a way out!" Jupiter suddenly said. "There must be a way out, fellas! Because the water cannot flow into a container that is closed at the top. Where would the air that the water displaces go? It's like pushing an upside-down glass into water! The air stays in!"

"Jupiter is right!" cried Corona. "Somewhere the air must escape! Otherwise the water could not rise! Why didn't we think of this before?"

"There can also be very narrow crevices in the rocks," whimpered the professor, who was only a shadow of his former self and was not a good swimmer.

"After all, Blackeye got out the first time round," Jupiter said ambiguously.

Now the ceiling was just over a metre above them. Jupiter grabbed Anderson's flashlight, kicked hard with his legs and systematically shone at the ceiling, searching.

Then he saw something. There was some sort of a slab protruding out from a part of the ceiling, and it could be concealing a crevice above it. He was not sure, as he could not see an opening from his current position. He needed the water to rise further up before he could check. As he could not see any other opening, this had to be it.

Jupiter didn't have to wait long. The water was rising fast. Finally, he was able to shine the torch above the slab-like structure. It was the crevice he had hoped for and it was about half a metre wide.

The professor tried to get himself into a good position to reach the crevice, but Pete unceremoniously pulled him away. "You got us into this, mister. Now you can show us what you learned in swimming lessons!"

Anyway, there was no time for discussion. The opening literally rushed towards them. Bob, Althena, Corona, Jupiter—in that order—pulled themselves through the hole just as the

water was sloshing below them. Pete had to hold his breath for a long and anxious moment, then he finally pushed himself through the passage far enough to get some air again.

After a few metres, the tunnel widened to a larger cave and the five detectives could finally stand on their feet again. Behind them, they heard Anderson crawling up, spitting and snorting.

The detectives looked ahead. There was a lime green glow. It was an exit overgrown with bushes. They are back in the open and had escaped the deadly trap!

Jupiter estimated that the water should have covered the entire cave by now. However, as no water came out of the tunnel, the water rising should have stopped.

## 18. “Well Done, Jupiter Jones!”

The staff and guests of the hotel had realized with great horror that something terrible had happened in the Cave of Torture and several people were trapped in there. They could not open the door as it was locked from the inside—fortunately so, as the water would have flooded the hotel. At least the steel door withstood the pressure.

It took quite a bit of climbing until the detectives were back at the hotel with a still coughing and spitting, but otherwise very silent Professor Anderson in tow. The arrival of the detectives was received with great relief.

Mrs Jennings demanded an explanation. The rest of the guests were gathered around in the lobby. Blackeye was on his pole.

After the detectives had exchanged a few glances, Jupiter took the floor and told everyone the story of the secret of the cave. He told about the double role of Stanley, who was actually Professor Anderson, and explained what Bob and Althena had experienced last night. There were occasional heckling, but nobody interrupted Jupiter.

“At first, we suspected Mr Jack Donnelly—” Jupiter said as he glanced across to Donnelly, “especially when he is using a false name. His real name is Hank Wheeler, under which, he writes as a journalist for a sensational newspaper in Hollywood. The purpose of his trip is apparently to follow the more famous of the guests here and to deliver a photo report about how they take to the creeps here.”

There was a loud murmur, followed by Fairbanks yelling: “Impertinence,” and Donnelly turned red.

“So you were out last night as well,” Bob now took over, “and by now, I know where you went—to visit Susan Dice in her room.” Now everybody was smiling.

“But back to our case,” Jupiter continued. “Let’s talk about the ghost of Walt Walker—as that should interest the Waterstone sisters in particular. He’s the student who has been missing since Professor Anderson’s trip to this area. By the way, Mrs Jennings, how is the poacher?”

“He is in the old dungeon and told us a hair-raising story,” replied Mrs Jennings.

“Which I will probably confirm now,” promised Jupiter. “The key was actually Blackeye.” The bird squawked as if he was crying out.

Jupiter turned around and shouted to the bird: “Hey, Blackeye... I’m scared!”

“Go or I’ll shoot you,” Blackeye replied as if shot out of a gun.

“Isn’t this dialogue familiar to you, Professor Anderson?” Jupiter said smugly. Anderson was silent.

“Walt and you were together that night of the accident. You actually found a way into the cave! It must have been somewhere near the gorge with the torrent. You then forced Walt to crawl into the cave to look for the coyote mask for you. Walt was very scared. He probably suspected that there was danger inside the cave. But you pulled a gun on him and yelled: ‘Go or I’ll shoot you.’”

“Walt was forced into the cave to get the mask for you. Then the water and mud started coming in. You managed to save yourself, but the cave was flooded and finally filled by debris—until the Mr and Mrs Jennings discovered it and had it uncovered.

“Henceforth, Professor, you lived with the terrible thought that you had driven Walt to his death. Well, as usual Walt had his pet bird with him that night—Blackeye, who became the only witness of the scene and who remembered you, Professor Anderson. The decisive clue to Blackeye was the newspaper photo that the Waterstone sisters had shown us. There is a thick white circle drawn around Walt, but you can see a small dark spot just above his right shoulder. That was Blackeye.”

There was a tense silence. Jupiter took a breath to lead the story to its end.

“Blackeye was able to save himself from the water and mud through the same hole that helped us today. He flew out and stayed in this area. Later, Mrs Jennings found the tame bird and presented him as an attraction in the hotel.

“When Anderson arrived, he recognized Blackeye and was immediately aware of the danger of the words that Blackeye squawked. The bird is a witness that Anderson hadn’t expected! So he released Blackeye from his cage and scared him away. So Blackeye flew to his owner. That was why the bird showed up where the minibuses were parked. And that’s why when I saw Blackeye there, I knew that his owner must be around too.”

Jupiter cleared his throat and turned directly to the Waterstones. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, but there is no ghost named Walt! The reason is because Walt Walker is still alive! Like us, he found the hole that saved him from the water. He was probably in shock. I guess that the Indians living nearby rescued him and he lived with them for a while.

“Anyway, Walt stayed around here—away from civilization. He became unrecognizable due to the weather, and his hair and beard. He became the poacher, adopted the name ‘Hok’ee’... and lived contentedly since. But when the cave was reopened, he had a premonition of who would come back for the mask. He was waiting for Professor Anderson.”

“I suspect Hok’ee saw the professor at the train station,” Pat interrupted him. “Suddenly, the past caught up with him. He took a shortcut into the gorge to give the Professor his first fright.”

Jupiter continued: “Yes, because from then on, that was all he wanted. He wanted Anderson to feel the fear that he himself had suffered when he almost drowned in the cave. So he opened the floodgates when Anderson got into the boat during the white-water rafting excursion... and Anderson didn’t suspect a thing.

“Unfortunately, Walt Walker has endangered many people,” said Jupiter. “Regardless of whether it is the right kind of punishment for Anderson, the courts must decide that. The chandelier fall was not meant for you, Miss Cynthia Waterstone, but for Mr Anderson.”

Cynthia moaned. “And the bones and the skeleton?” she asked.

“I believe they are fakes,” Jupiter replied, “just one of Mrs Jennings’s ideas to give the cave a spookier feel.”

Mrs Jennings nodded at The First Investigator. “Congratulations! Thus an old story comes to an astonishing end! It will take some time to repair the cave... Pat, bring us the poacher so that Anderson can look at him in the eye.”

As Pat left for the dungeon, Mrs Jennings continued: “Thank you, Jupiter. Thank you all of you detectives. Of course all my guests will receive an invitation for another holiday in the hotel—all but one of course,” she added with a glance at Professor Anderson.

A loud murmur rose. Now there was much to discuss. Jupiter stepped next to Pete and Bob, who were together with Corona and Althena.

“Well done, Jupiter Jones,” Corona received him with appreciation. “At least in this case you—and especially you, Jupiter—deserve to be the top detective in California!”

Jupiter turned pale pink, but modestly refused the compliment. “Corona, if you hadn’t generously given us the translation of the Indian verse, we would not have solved the

mystery. Also, you figured out that Pete had to jump to trigger the opening mechanism. Last night, Althena and Bob decisively disrupted the professor, and both figured out that the mask was not to be taken. Finally, Pete, if you had not made that courageous leap, I would still be scratching aimlessly at the boulder. I mean it was a great team effort!”

They could hear an excited squawk.

“I’d forgotten all about you, Blackeye!” cried Jupiter laughing. “Your repeating words gave the important clue! And then your constant appearing and disappearing. Putting all of them together revealed the connections!”

Blackeye bobbed from one foot to the other. “Well done, Jupeeterr Jonessss!” he squawked.